

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)

ILLUSTRATION BY: SIDU



— THE
MISSING
CHILDREN —

KAGEROU DAZE IV

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VOLUME 4: THE MISSING CHILDREN

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)

ILLUSTRATED BY SIDU



NEW YORK

Today's the first day I've ever written a journal.

It being the first time, to be honest, I'm still having trouble figuring out what I should write.

"Write about what happened that day," he said, but it's not like a lot of things happen around here worth writing about. It feels kind of pointless.

Ahh, but I'm just being a pain. I owe him at least this much. Let me try again.

Oh, right! Something did happen today. I brought my daughter out of the house for the first time.

Her eyes practically lit up at everything around her as she asked me what "this" was and what "that" was. It was like watching a mirror image of myself at her age.

Oh, and when she started chasing a big bumblebee around, you couldn't say he was in a panic.

I tried swatting it off, but then it started chasing me around. My daughter and I had a nice laugh about that.

It's almost summertime. I'm not sure how many it's been since we started living here.

Come to think of it, it was about this hot and humid when we came here, too. Stifflingly so.

Looking back, it's always so surprising. How quickly time flies!

How many more summers will the three of us see together?

How many more times will the three of us laugh and smile together?

I should probably stop thinking about it. No point getting all despondent about it.

Journals like these are all about reading them long after the fact and savoring all the things that seemed so important to you back then. I better try to make this journal as enjoyable as I can.

If I'm going through the effort, I shouldn't just focus on the day's events. I should write about all the things I've seen and heard up till now, too.

Yes. That should work.

If, whenever my daughter takes an interest in the outside world, this journal does anything to help her out, then I couldn't ask for anything else. That's how I think about it, anyway.

I'll try to spice things up some more starting tomorrow.

It's not every day he gives me a present like this, besides. I need to write in it daily, if I can.

And I think I'll wrap things up that way today.

Here's to another great day tomorrow.

I was in a dark place.

There was no left, no right, no up or down.

It didn't feel cold; it didn't feel hot.

That kind of place.

REAPER RECORD I

I don't know how much time I spent in there. Not even now, after I found out what "time" was.

When I was in there, I shouldn't have even had any concept, or sense, of what "dark" meant anyway.

It wasn't until I encountered "bright," somewhere during the process, that it dawned on me that "oh, I was in a dark place, wasn't I?"

That's how the world works, much of the time.

Whenever you run into something new, that helps you understand things from your past for the first time.

Encountering "today" makes you realize what "yesterday" was. Encountering "morning" teaches you what "night" means.

It was just a little while ago when an encounter with "winter" made me realize what "summer" was all about.

Once I learned how to discover all of these things, I realized for the first time that this world is in a constant state of dramatic change.

After the darkness that ruled over me up to now, this world, and all the wide variety of things that covered every inch of it, seemed to transform every time I blinked.

I first took an interest in this world, this place I wasn't even conscious of before, at the end of my first blink.

The "sky," cycling between light and dark at regular intervals.

The "sea," soaking in the sunlight from above to shine a gleaming

blue.

The “rain,” falling upon the “land.”

And the “life” that followed soon behind.

Without being directed to by anyone in particular, I stared on at these “things” in the world, and one by one, I kept making the connections that helped me understand.

It was one discovery after another, among all the things that were born and decayed away...I spent a great while doing this, or so it felt.

I watched over the world as it changed, for so long that I felt there was nothing I could rely upon any longer apart from my own wits.

Then, one day, I realized:

Once this line of thinking begins to spin up, it absolutely detests the idea of stopping.

Even if I tried sitting there without a thought in my mind, like how it was back in the darkness, the “knowledge” I gained continually lobbed questions at me, one after the other.

“What’s this?”

“What’s that made out of?”

“Why is this here?”

There was nothing I could do to suppress the curiosity bursting from my mind. I had no reason to. Instead, I set my body adrift in the sea of questions, pressing on with my daily journey of discovery and understanding.



One day, I ventured inside a cave. I followed a narrow trail until it

opened up into a large cavern, a pond spreading out across the interior.

Cracks ran here and there across the exposed rock ceiling, the sunlight that wriggled through them flickering against the pool's surface.

As I looked at one of the faint points of light on the water, I spotted a tiny figure on its surface.

It looked quite unlike any creature I had seen before—just standing there, as if peering intently at me.

It didn't particularly concern me at first. I knew by now that life wasn't a rare thing. There was no telling what you might find in your travels.

The surprising thing, though, was that it seemed like this creature "recognized" me.

Having someone stare at me so attentively was a wholly alien experience.

I wasn't sure why, but even though creatures seemed capable of noticing and interacting with each other, not a single one of them ever took notice of me.

This figure, meanwhile, was looking straight at me. He didn't have any "eyes," but I could tell regardless.

I took an interest at this sight, returning the gaze for a little while. Then I realized the figure was none other than myself.

What a shock it was.

It seemed strange that I failed to notice until now. Just like every other form of life, I had my own physical form.

This chance encounter with my own form filled my mind with

curiosity.

I looked over every curve and crevice of my body. “How long have I looked like this?” “What does *this* do?” “Why am I shaped like this?”

But I failed to come up with an answer to any of the questions that came to mind.

It honestly felt strange.

As if I knew not even the slightest thing about “myself.”

I fully comprehended all the many forms of life I had learned of, yet...

A question floated into existence, instantly drowning out all other thought.

“Who made me?”

In terms of what I knew, maybe I could have been defined as a “creature” that just...*appeared* one day.

But if I fell under that definition, that meant there had to be some being out there to give birth to me. In all the time I spent in this land, I never encountered anything like that.

I knew because I had an intimate view of how “creatures” began, at least once. And judging by the sight, the way I was given life must have fundamentally differed from that.

That, and even though these creatures eventually grew unable to retain their forms over “time”—even though they seemed to face their demise before they even had a chance to breathe—I had no sense that would ever occur to me. Perhaps it was more natural for me to think of myself as “something” completely different.

But...

“In that case, what *am* I?”

I had been on a journey of understanding, putting the pieces that appeared before me together to blaze a trail to the answers I sought. But I had never thought about “myself” before.

So I began to think deeply, trying to root out an answer to the question in my mind.

I closed my eyes, plunging into the darkness that lay ahead.

It conjured memories of the all-too-familiar darkness that once surrounded me.

I need to track it down.

Once more. From the beginning.



...There was no telling how much time passed.

For a long time—quite a long one—I stood there and went on a journey through my memories, trying to find an explanation for “myself.”

Relying on all the knowledge I built up to that point, I focused my pondering massive thought process down one path, then another, in careful order.

It was enough to make my head swim...not that I feared that would happen, but the journey proved so long and arduous that I felt close to such a phenomenon for a moment.

And then, this journey of thought, propelled by nothing less than pure curiosity, finally reached its terminus.

I had completed my exhaustive analysis of every memory in my mind, from the first one I could still remember until the moment I

closed my eyes.

But the result:

“...I don’t know.”

The conclusion slipped out of my mouth. It was the sole conclusion I could make, but I still found it utterly disappointing.

The core of it was this: There was no way, no method whatsoever, for me to explain myself.

Although it occasionally took some time, there was nothing I encountered before that I couldn’t eventually gain an understanding of. Not this time.

I tried again, running across my reminiscences for another cycle, but still to no avail.

Coming face-to-face with a question that so doggedly refused to give up its answer was, frankly, a source of intense frustration.

Frustration...?

There’s one thing I gained from the journey, at least.

As the thought occurred to me, my concentration loosened, and I finally opened my eyes.

The water’s surface in front of me still showed my reflection. The dark figure. A shadow. No head, or legs, or tail, but just an inky dark presence.

The frustration I felt earlier grew exponentially at this inexplicable shape before me.

It’d be nice if I at least had a form that was easier to understand, to explain.

If I at least had all the basic parts—the head, the legs—it might be at least a tad easier to understand matters than the way it stood.

As I ruefully lodged the complaint with myself, the dark shadow reflected in the water suddenly grew two red points of light.

They shone a deep red, like the blood shed by living creatures.

I was somewhat surprised at this turn of events, but my mind remained oddly serene.

Are these...“eyes”? I don’t think these were there before...

But...ah. Yes. I have “eyes” after all.

That at least made me resemble a living thing more, but would that be enough? If I’m this noncreature “thing,” then what do I have to do next...?

Seizing upon this new bit of information, I decided to think it over once more. Just as I did, I heard the sound of small pebbles grinding against themselves behind me.

It startled me, but my head calmly processed the situation.

I knew this sound. Living creatures made it as they trudged or slithered across the ground.

Instinctively, I turned toward the sound. Whatever made it must be traveling down the same subterranean path I was.

Judging by how it seemed to be approaching me, it sounded like a small creature walking on two legs. Several of them, actually.

And as I pondered over this, I was greeted by exactly the sight expected: a group of small creatures, before me.

But these, too, were unlike any I had seen before.

What made them different were the “sticks of flame” they held.

The flames must have lit up the dark cavern as they proceeded along.

Driven by curiosity, I peered intently in their direction. Finally, one of the creatures noticed me.

As they approached, their forms grew more distinct to me underneath the flames.

They were wrapped in a sort of pelt, something organic woven into fine threads.

Some of them also held what looked like small, sharpened bits of mineral, probably for self-protection.

Judging by the wielding of fire, they must have been rather intelligent.

They swiveled their heads around the cavern, as if on the lookout for something. Predators, perhaps.

Indeed, given their collective size, a larger creature could've swallowed them up in one gulp.

As I sat and watched, adrift in my thoughts, the group came to an abrupt stop, turning their flames in my direction and emitting loud, harried cries.

They were shrill, wailing, as if a moment away from being preyed upon. Caught off guard by this, I swiftly began to think.

Who are these people? Why are they launching into such a pained hue and cry like that?

Ignoring my silent query, the creatures began whirling their handheld flames in the air, their caterwauling still as loud and disquieting as ever.

The crimson afterimage of their fire danced in the darkness.

“Flame”

The phenomenon that “burns” things.

That, I knew. But why were they swinging it around like that?

Their frenzied act, as if trying to ward some unseen enemy off, was beyond my understanding. But the moment a tendril of fire lapped against me, the purpose thudded into my mind.

My calm, composed line of thought stopped cold, and instead, a fearsome emotion dominated my thoughts like nothing before.

“Hot”

Hot, hot, hot, hot.

The sharp, painful feeling threw me into a state of confusion.

What could it *be*?!

The pain!

It's hot!

This pain! I don't understand it! I cannot bear it!

The creatures illuminated by the fire stared, eyes wide open and clearly pointed at me.

A dull, distasteful feeling shot across my brain, now wholly dominated by the intense pain.

I tensed my body in a panic, and the flame swung up at me and traced an orange arc in the air, failing to land a second strike.

Twisting my body to remain at a safe distance, I found it difficult to summon the strength to continue. I felt an oozing pain in the burnt areas.

There was no escaping these waves of hurt. Once I realized it, I felt “fear” for the first time in my life.

Why?

I was never burned by fire before now. Not even once.

In fact, I had never made physical contact with anything in this world. Why was this happening?

Troubled, I tried my best to think it over. But this new sense of “fear” seeping into my body proved to be a substantial obstacle.

The creatures acted surprised at my rearward leap, but soon they were thrusting their flame at me once more.

I squirmed and writhed, trying to escape from this place at once, but I couldn't.

My mind and body were unable to cope with this stunning situation.

All I could do was quiver at the sight of these creatures, ceaselessly trying to inflict me with yet more pain.

I'm scared. Who are these people? What am I supposed to do?

Do creatures attack other “things”? What purpose would there be to...?

“...Are they trying to eat me?”

The moment the thought came to mind, I was consumed by fear.

The reason why creatures attack one another in this world.

Much of the time, it was to capture “prey.”

Predation upon other creatures, so that you yourself might survive.

Yes. I knew that.

So am I going to die, consumed by these attackers, like the strong prey upon the weak?

That must be the case.

It explained why these people relentlessly tormented me, even as I tried to flee.

Ahh, they're going to kill me.

I might get eaten.

Will I die?

What happens when I die?

Will I be able to think any longer?

Suddenly, one of the flame bearers took out an oddly shaped item at its side.

Some kind of liquid was sloshing around inside.

Without a moment's hesitation, the creature splashed the contents toward me.

The next moment, the flame in the creature's hand roared to life, jumping over to my body.

The fire burned high enough to obscure my sight. Pain ripped across me.

I tried to shake it off, but my body refused to listen, stiffened in fear and unable to move.

Only one thought raced across my mind.

"I can't...The burning...I don't want to die. I don't want to die. I

don't want to die!"

My body trembled in anguish. Just as I resigned myself to it all being "over," the cries of one of the creatures made me doubt my ears.

"I'll kill you, you monster!"

There was nothing different about the echoing cry from before.

But now, to my mind, the cries of the creatures before me took on that meaning as they bounced against the cavern walls.

There was no point trying to comprehend this new sense of mine. My "consciousness," a presence I was starting to curse with every fiber of my body, had already begun to gradually fade away.

The scene around me grew indistinct, then began to darken. As if on cue, the pain of the fire, along with the fear, slowly seemed to resolve itself.

With no way to resist, no way to see anything, and my consciousness about to disappear, all that echoed in my mind were the creatures' cries.

"...What's wrong?! What happened?!"

"Snake! Agh, dammit...Watch out! They're still crawling around!"

What were these people going on about?

What's a snake?

I didn't know what the word meant, but whatever it was clearly struck fear into the creatures' hearts.

That, at least, I could vaguely understand.

Shortly afterward, one of the creatures to the rear shouted out.

“Go back! Go back!”

I heard the sound of feet against hard ground.

They must have taken off in a hurry.

But why would they leave so quickly?

Was that how much this snake creature made them quiver in fear?

I was still unable to see anything, but that helped make the meaning behind the echoing sounds all the more clear to me.

The other creatures dashed off in a mad flurry, following the first one. They seemed to be heading for the exit.

And may they stay away forever, I prayed with all my heart.

Even after the panicked group’s frenzied footsteps faded away, the remnants of sound they left behind reflected again and again off the stone walls, ringing pointedly for a while longer.

For whatever reason, the group was gone. I managed to escape with my life.

Or did I? I wasn’t sure.

I still couldn’t see the cavern around me, and the pain was already gone.

Perhaps I was dead, well and truly.

As the thought occurred to me, I heard something pulse, a loud *thump* in the silent darkness.

It wasn’t from the outside. In fact, it seemed to come from within me...

“...Nh?!”

Suddenly, the burnt parts of my body screamed in pain, sharply stabbing at my brain and making me groan out loud.

As if on cue, my vision returned, and my muddled mind began to kick back into gear.

Taking a hurried look around, I found that the pondside creatures were truly gone.

They had opted to retreat after all.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but intense pangs of pain, accompanied by a loud, throbbing sound from within me, shot across every inch of my body.

Pain. A sensation, unerringly linked to fear, that was difficult to cope with.

Judging by how that rabble acted before, they were presumably subject to the same sensation as well.

“Pain” gives birth to “fear”...

I feared I knew that all too well now.

The continuous pain I felt indicated to me that it was going nowhere very soon. But even though this “pain” remained, it felt like nothing too drastic compared to the specter of death.

It was a surprise to me, how my body seemed so suddenly vital and precious.

As my mind gradually restored itself to normal, it naturally began to dwell on the events that just took place.

Who were those...things, these creatures that carried fire with them?

They clearly had murder on their minds. They had tried to kill me.

The more I reflected upon them, the more terrifying they seemed.

From my perspective, they must have been my “predators.”

My body began to shiver again, much to my anguish.

Fear. A sensation I wish I had never known about.

I wanted to forget about it as soon as possible, but it had already rooted itself deep within my body. I doubted it would be forgotten anytime soon.

...That must have been it. The expressions I beheld on the creatures the moment they faced death. That must have been what caused it—fear.

The foreboding I had just had, the thought that everything I was made of would be lost for eternity; the feeling of falling into a bottomless darkness.

Here in this world, moments of such abject desperation were endlessly repeated, day after day, a countless number of times.

As I thought about that, the world began to feel terrifying to me.

Look at me. I had only the most cursory, superficial knowledge of the world, of myself.

That was how much the transformation within me was changing my view of the world.

And just as I gained that full concept of exactly how clueless I was, I simultaneously began to feel that, as of right now, I was a part of the planet.

The thought never occurred to me before that I had anything to fear. Perhaps it was best to let my own body figure out how best to endure this monumental change.

...Come to think of it, they shouted “snake” toward the end as they shuddered in fear. What was that, anyway?

Curious, I turned to the area where they were standing, only to find something creeping and wriggling on the ground.

It was a deep shade of black, long and tentacle-like, as it knotted itself up and slithered around the pond.

“Ee...!”

The moment I recognized it, my mind fell to pieces once again.

Fear was apparently something that came back far too easily once it was learned. It was proving to be quite an adversary.

Is that the “snake” that made the creatures bearing fire tremble in horror? It looked like there were several of them; would they go after me next...?

I shivered, sensing the danger to my physical form, but what I imagined to be one of the “snake” creatures ignored this, crawling right up to where I was.

It appeared my recent transformation allowed other creatures to sense my presence now.

That I knew well enough. But I had no way to defend myself against them.

If I was attacked again, I doubted I could do very much any longer.

I flexed my muscles, preparing myself to flee from this approaching terror.

But, as before, my body wasn't listening to me.

The strength I called upon failed to materialize, dissipating off into

space, as if I had completely forgotten how to move my body.

But even as I helplessly flailed about, in a useless attempt to run away, the snake came close enough that a single strike was all but guaranteed to do me in.

“Agh...D-don’t, don’t kill me!”

I instinctively let out a cry, my mind in a panic.

The voice echoed off the cavern’s stone walls, repeating itself over and over again.

It was the first time I had done anything like that, of course. The surprise at what I did sent a tingle across my entire body.

For whatever reason, I felt an odd sense of embarrassment, my mind entangled in an even deeper jumble than before.

I knew what I meant to communicate with my cry. But did it come across that way?

The “snake” stopped moving at once, flicked its tongue out a few times, then began to speak.

“We attacked the humans because they are onerous creatures who threaten to destroy our home. We have no reason to kill you.”

I was able to clearly comprehend the snake’s consciousness.

It said they wouldn’t kill me. That was how it sounded, at least.

Whether they heard this statement or not, the pile of writhing snakes by the side untangled themselves and slithered off, disappearing in all directions.

This cavern must be where they all reside, I supposed.

So much time must have passed as I sat and thought over things,

enough that these creatures were born and thrived while I wasn't paying attention.

Then—perhaps out of my happiness at sharing my will with the “snake,” perhaps out of relief at their lack of hostility—the area around my eyes began to grow warmer.

“What, are you crying?”

“...Crying? What's that?”

“Oh, you don't know? ...Hmm. I see. You don't know anything, do you?”

The snake coiled itself as it spoke, offering two flicks of its tongue.

For some reason, the snake's accusation made me feel a touch of anger.

“Of course I do. I've looked on at this world for far, far longer than you have. I know most of what there is to know.”

I blurted out the words, even though I had only just realized how much of the world I truly had no idea about.

Regret began to swirl in the back of my head. I could have been honest and admitted to my ignorance, but no. Why did I have to brag like that?

“All right. In that case, who are you?”

As I should have expected, the snake's question stopped me cold.

Whether it was aware of this or not, it fired a salvo unerringly at the subject I knew the least of all about.

This vicious bully, I thought to myself, resentment pooling in my stomach. But, since resenting the question wouldn't solve anything, I decided to be truthful.

“I...That, I don’t know. I was just thinking about how I wanted to learn.”

Saying “I don’t know” was not exactly painting me in a positive light, but that was the only answer I could reasonably offer.

If I boldly proclaimed that I did know, it would inevitably come back to bite me. I resolved to avoid saying anything that needlessly painted me into a corner.

The snake gave a straightforward “I see” to my response.

It sounded chiding, judgmental, and I felt the anger return to my head. I held it back as the snake continued.

“Well, sorry about that. I was just wondering, since you were using our language. But why do you want to know about yourself? You’re a strange creature.”

I could hear the snake’s words, but failed to understand them.

It’s “strange” to want to learn about oneself?

I had no idea what the creature meant.

“What are you talking about? Do *you* know what I am at all?”

“Not really. I couldn’t wager a guess.”

The snake mockingly flicked its tongue at me again.

“Oh, but perhaps the humans could offer guidance to you. They seek to understand what they are as well. Maybe they could serve as a ‘mirror’ to you.”

I pondered for a moment over what “humans” were. When I realized it meant the creatures that attacked me earlier, I flew into a rage.

“You want me to mingle with *them*? They almost killed me a

moment ago! How could they ever teach me anything about what I...”

I stopped suddenly, the words vanishing from my mouth, as I recalled one of the words the humans lobbed in my direction.

“...Monster!”

Yes. They called me a “monster.”

And given the total lack of hesitation they showed as they called me that, the humans must have known something about me.

But...

“...Indeed. Judging by their words, they seemed to know me well enough. But they nearly killed me as well. If I ran into them again and they attacked, it would be an unwinnable battle.”

It was true. I was afraid of another strike.

It filled me with inscrutable fear, giving me an all-new appreciation of why all the creatures of this world strove to avoid it.

“Would it? Well, it would be best for you to decide what to do. You are the only one here capable of knowing anything.”

“Ngh...But what should I do?”

If I didn’t make an effort to meet the humans again, I would never learn what I was.

But if they brandished their fire at me again, I would have both no knowledge and no life to spend learning it.

The snake, perhaps sympathetic as it watched me agonize over this, slowly spoke up.

“Hmm. Then think about this. Why did the humans attack you?”

“...Because I am different from them, I imagine. Another breed. That’s how all the other creatures I’ve seen acted.”

“So what can you do to avoid being attacked?”

I thought for a moment.

“What can I do? ...Would looking the same as them keep them calm?”

The snake cocked its head to the side. It apparently meant it as a signal to look back toward the pond.

“...Huh? You want me to see my reflection? What purpose is there to that?”

The snake did not respond, instead repeatedly cocking its head back in an effort to coax me toward the pond.

“What is with this creature...?”

I ruefully began to stir myself in an effort to reach the pond, but my body still doggedly refused to listen to me.

“Grh...and what is with *me*, for that matter...?”

But compared to my last round of flailing, things had improved somewhat. It took time and effort, but I finally managed to begin moving.

Why am I doing any of this at all?

My mind was filled with resentment, aimed toward the snake and its wordless command.

It wasn’t like anything would change from the last time I saw my reflection. It would be the same shadowy form as before. What point was there to double-checking?

And when this inevitably accomplishes nothing for me, what

should I do to make the snake pay for it?

Oh. Wait. The snake was strong. A predator. I could do nothing against it.

Slowly dragging my body along, I finally made it to the edge of the pond.

Even traveling this short distance filled me with intense fatigue.

Nothing like this had ever happened to me before. I felt a tremendous sense of injustice at it all.

As I did, I peered into the pond's surface, only to be rendered speechless at the sight spread out before me.

On the pale green water's façade, there was a creature, light orange in color.

It was clearly, obviously, the form of a human being.

My body jolted, startled at this unexpected shock. I let out a surprised yelp.

But the human reflected in the water showed no signs of hostility, instead rearing back itself in the same way, its facial expression difficult to put into words.

Regaining my wits, I slowly, hesitantly examined the image.

It required only a few moments of thought before the meaning behind this vision became clear.

“Is this...*me*?!”

It was a dark shadow not long ago, but now, floating on the water's surface, it had somehow morphed into something highly reminiscent of a human.

Compared to the humans from earlier, it was a smaller, less robust-looking body. But there was no mistaking this form, these contours.

It did not bear the strange pelt worn by my attackers, but its structure was more or less identical to them.

“What...what...!”

I was thrown into a vast confusion, a feeling worryingly familiar to me as of late.

As it would be to anyone, I suppose, going face-to-face with this constant barrage of extraordinary events.

The figure on the surface’s mouth opened wide, mirroring the emotions in my heart as its expression grew more and more enigmatic.

So this is how I looked whenever I felt flustered. It seemed natural enough to me.

I applied my strength to an arm. The arm on the surface moved along with it.

Then I put both hands into the air, using them to feel the contours of my body. The sensation on my palms and across my skin told me that this, before me, was my own corporeal form.

The faint warmth that emanated from my body felt different than the flame from the humans.

As I felt around it, the sense that this truly was my own body began to grow clear in my mind. Then, as if willed into consciousness, all my senses from head to toe seemed to make themselves known.

So the voice I unconsciously let out came from this throat?

And if I used these legs for transport, that would explain how much of an ordeal moving around had suddenly become.

I continued examining my body, curiosity getting the better of me, as the snake appeared in the water's surface I was so carefully inspecting.

"That was how you looked to me, up to now. But it doesn't seem you were aware of it, were you?"

"...I just noticed now," I said, bringing my exploring hands to rest. "But it makes no sense to me. What's happening to me, really?"

"Who can say?" the snake replied. "I certainly cannot. What I can say is that I've never seen a creature like you before."

I didn't know how many more creatures were born into this world while I was here, pondering in this cavern. But this one had seen nothing like me...in its own life, at least.

From my body to the power of speech, I had gained much. But not even these gifts seemed to provide me with any immediate answer to my one all-consuming concern.

Considering all the suggestive questions this creature was asking, it was proving to be surprisingly unhelpful. As I thought about this, it spoke again, saying "But..." before falling silent.

"What?" I replied, a bit startled. I wondered if it was reading my mind.

"You certainly are quite an unusual creature. You appeared from thin air in this empty cavern, you've changed your shape and form in assorted ways, and you can understand the speech of other creatures. And from what I can tell, it seems like you are trying to become... something else, from now forward."

"I'm trying to become...myself, you mean? Stop giving me that nonsense. I've always *been* myself. That's what I'm trying to learn."

The snake flicked its tongue, backing away.

“No, no, I understand. It was just a passing thought. Feel free to forget about it. I had best return to my dwelling now. It’s been very fascinating, encountering a creature as interesting as yourself.”



“You’re leaving? Well, thanks for your help.”

“It was hardly anything,” the snake replied, before disappearing through a crevice to parts unknown.

I was left, all alone, in the ensuing silence.

On the water’s surface, my form, so classically reminiscent of a human, remained clear.

“...Human.”

I raised an arm up high once more, making a fist several times.

The way it felt now, it wouldn’t take too much more time to move my body around normally.

If anything was made clear now, it was that I would be unable to discover anything I truly wanted to know if I stayed here.

“Hopefully they won’t attack me...”

I imagine, in a short time, I’ll be leaving this cavern and going off to meet the humans.

I don’t know what will come of it quite yet, but unless I know for myself the portent that lies behind the word “monster,” I doubt I’ll ever satisfy the curiosity welling within me.

“...This seems like such a frail body, though. Something a bit more stronger-looking would have been nice.”

What’s happening in the outside world?

I hope it’s not winter, at least.

It’s too quiet then, and there’s almost nothing to break the monotony.

I'd prefer it to be summer, ripe with boundless change. But I wonder...

With a little bit of hope and a large helping of anxiety, I wobbled to my feet and moved my legs toward the cavern exit.

CHILDREN RECORD III

Ayano swiveled her head around, looking out for unwelcome ears, then spoke in a whisper:

“...That teacher has to be a space alien or something. I have, like, no idea what he’s going on about.”

It was a clear, sunny day outside.

It was also the dead of summer, with all the stereotypical traits involved—the searing heat, the constant whine of cicadas.

Ayano, sitting loosely on her window-side seat in the far rear of the classroom, turned to me, gauging my response.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah.”

I blurted it out, dreading the rant that was all but guaranteed to follow. Ayano shrugged and put her head on the desk.

“Aww. Why you gotta be so distant like that, Shintaro?”

“Well, ’cause you’re talking a bunch of BS again. Like, what do you mean, alien? It’s not *my* fault if you don’t understand the lecture.”

“No, but...”

Flipping through the textbook revealed nothing particularly tricky or difficult.

It’s just that she’s *slow*, is all. The only “aliens” around here are people like her who can’t breeze through this class like any normal person.

“The dumber you are, the more you pin the blame on other people,

huh? I mean, you failed the last test, too, didn't you? You're probably on a one-way path to remedial classes if you keep *that* up. Besides, why are you—"

Normally she'd interrupt at this point to say, "Sorry, you're right. I'm stupid. Give me a break." Today she was being obstinate.

As I thought about this, I looked over to find Ayano sitting back up in her seat, eyes focused squarely upon me.

Considering her usual easygoing disposition, it was rare. I winced under her withering gaze.

"Wh-what? Did I hurt your feelings?"

Ayano declined to answer the question.

"You know, Shintaro, you say that stuff to me and all, but you know I know, right? About how you skip out on studying because you're such a *geeeenius* and just browse porn on the Internet all day. I saw you doing it yesterday, even."

My heart leaped out of my stomach at this unexpected (and, I should add, excessively high-volume) salvo.

My brain began processing the facts at the speed of light. How does *she* know about that? She couldn't. I've never invited her into my room, and besides, I always erase my browsing history. Unless she has a surveillance camera or something...

One wonders how the brain can suddenly shift into turbo mode at times like these.

Chugging away faster than it ever did before, my mind bravely attempted to concoct a superior excuse I could give her.

Following orders from my head, my throat immediately set out to utter the explanation I had queued up. *This oughta do it. It'll be perfect!*

“Wh-whaa?! What...what kind of crap is *that*? I’m not—like—I *never* look at that junk! I don’t care about *porn* or anything! I’ve never watched a porno in my whole life!”

The excuse I prepared never quite saw the light of day. Instead, an extremely implausible one emanated from my lips.

Even I could tell how much of a flaming lie it was. An uncomfortable sweat began to prevail over my body, accelerated by the “Oh, *really*?” Ayano greeted my defense with.

The next moment, Ayano’s chair scraped loudly against the floor as she shot to her feet, her scorning eyes still upon me.

Moving into a half crouch, she brought her face mere inches away from mine.

“What a pack of lies. I heard about *everything*.”

Her long hair, thanks in part to its distance from me, smelled a little too strongly like one brand of shampoo or another.

My brain, a helpless victim of this odor barrage, briskly switched to nonoperative status.

But, really, there’s no way she could’ve known about that. My history can’t be on there. I’d *never* make a careless error like that. That much, at least, I was supremely confident about.

“Y-you heard it from *who*?! Stop getting so close to me!”

I shouted it out in self-defense, but thanks to her point-blank range, I could neither speak very loudly nor look her in the eyes.

“From who...?”

Ayano smirked at me, then brought her lips closer to one of my ears.

The intense shampoo smell descended upon me, freezing me solid

to my seat.

This was bad. I had absolutely no clue what she was trying to do. All I could do was shut my eyes tightly, otherwise totally defenseless.

The sense of urgency was finally broken by Ayano's voice wafting its way into my ear.

“...Did you forget about me, master?”

“...Dude, Ene?!”

I opened my eyes to find...no Ene. Even Ayano was gone.

The classroom I was seated in had disappeared without a trace.

In its place was a ceiling lined with pipes, naked lightbulbs hanging down from it, and Kido staring down at me as she dried her hair with a towel.

“No. Kido. Not Ene.”

Kido, sporting a T-shirt as the smell of her shampoo enveloped her, must have just gotten out of the bath. She gave me an off-put look.

“...Oh. Um, sorry.”

“I don't know what kinda dream you were having, but it's morning. You gotta get up.”

Kido walked toward the front door, still rubbing her hair dry.

I stared up at the ceiling. “Hey, it's morning,” I heard Kido say, raising her voice. “Get up. Why the hell're you sleeping there?”

That explained her sudden trip to the front door. I figured going out with wet hair and a T-shirt was a little unprepared by Kido standards.

The order, as I expected, was quickly followed by Konoha groggily muttering “Oh, um, uh? Where am I?” I saw him sleeping on the

sofa last night, but couldn't guess what position he was taking now.

It was the third morning since I first got involved with these guys.

Looking at the clock, I saw it was just about nine in the morning.

I usually slept for around fourteen hours at a time whenever I conked out, but falling back to sleep like this in someone else's house made even someone like me feel a bit embarrassed.

I began to stir, trying to sit up, when I felt a dull pain in both of my thighs. I groaned a little in response and fell limply back on the sofa.

"Why are you moaning like that?" Kido asked suspiciously. She sounded clearly annoyed, so I pretended not to hear.

Who could blame me? All the walking I'd done yesterday and the day before was gonna take its toll on my spindly legs sooner or later.

But that was really all it took? The thought made me want to give up all hope for my life, but I tried to rally myself back to functionality.

It all reminded me of how, in comics and stuff, you see heroes get really pumped up and unleash powers beyond anything they ought to be capable of, only to pay the price in some cosmic, karmic way afterward.

Something that only happens, of course, to the hero of the story. I had a tendency to think of myself as the hero of an epic tale only I was aware of more often than I'd like to admit.

My mind filled up, as it often did, with the vast stores of anime and manga knowledge I had built up over the years. But it wasn't enough to keep me from recalling the dream I just had.

Ayano.

She's been in my dreams a few times before now, but her appearances were growing a lot more frequent in recent days.

Maybe it's the heat getting to me. Or maybe it's my mind naturally refusing to get close to anybody else.

Thinking about it, I went through largely the same process when Ene showed up.

When she was first starting to wriggle her way into my life, I dreamed about Ayano on practically a nightly basis.

I remember having an argument with Ene once, actually, because she forced me awake during one of those dreams.

It wasn't one of our usual tit-for-tat squabbles, either. I went into an angry tirade, and she raised her voice at me, too, something that almost never happens.

What was I talking about with Ayano, though...? I didn't remember very much, probably because it was the middle of the night and I was half-asleep anyway.

Either way, the next morning, feeling pretty bad about my behavior, I apologized profusely to Ene. I still clearly remember how she lorded it over me: "You're forgiven," she had said. "It feels kinda pointless to bully a virgin like you anyway."

Why couldn't I forget about *that* part of it all? Sometimes I truly resented the self-flagellating streak my brain had.

As I dwelt on this, I heard the sound of running water from the kitchen, followed by someone opening the refrigerator door. Breakfast must be coming soon.

"Oh, uh, sorry! Here, lemme help."

I got up again, taking care not to overly tax the sore bits of my body. I was free of pain, so it must not have been as bad as I feared.

“Hm? Can you cook, Shintaro?”

The plates rattled in the sink as Kido washed them. I wanted to reply “well, yeah, duh,” but of course I’ve never prepared a full-on meal in my life.

Although it usually had the consistency of half-frozen cough syrup and the taste to match, at least Momo made an honest effort with her food.

The fact I was able to convince myself of that probably says all that needs to be said about my own skills.

“Huh. Well, okay. Have a seat.”

With that final glancing blow to my ego, Kido silently focused her attention back on the dishes.

The pain from being reminded of how unnecessary I was began to gradually fill my heart.

A shut-in like me is a delicate creature. They need to keep thinking that someone needs them, or else they’ll keel over.

Luckily, thanks to the man fast asleep on the floor by the front entrance, my sense of self-loathing was tempered somewhat.

In fact, nobody else was up yet, either. There wasn’t much need for me to be around, was there?

I felt a little bad about how completely dependent I was on Kido’s motherly kindness at the moment. But there’s no reason not to relax a bit more.

What’s gonna be for breakfast?

Some of the old standbys would be nice right now. Eggs, bacon, sausage, that kind of thing.

But wait. This is getting out of hand, isn’t it?

Sleeping under the same roof with a woman, then having her make breakfast for me?

Whoa whoa whoa. She's here. She's right here, and she's headed my way.

.....

...No. I should stop. I'd *like* to think it, but I can't keep that line of thought going forever.

I have to get this aggressive streak out of my mind, or I'll never be in any mood for breakfast.

The only people here right now are me and Kido.

If I'm going to ask it, now's the time.

I stood up and headed for the kitchen.

Kido, standing in the kitchen, had her hair tied back and wore the same apron as yesterday. She was just about ready to heat up the frying pan.

"You got a second?"

"What?" she replied behind her back, cracking an egg into the pan with a practiced motion. "I told you to sit down."

Part of me *did* want to sit down, badly. But no. Not gonna happen.

I opened my mouth, taking care not to bring up anything that'd rile her.

"Um, last night...late. I think Kano came back home. Did you notice him?"

"Kano? No, I didn't see him at all."

Kido began whipping the egg in the frying pan with a pair of metal chopsticks.

Scrambled eggs, huh? I continued on, even as my mind began taking a side route into the realm of food once more.

“Listen, does that...? Do you think Kano maybe, um, has something against me? Did he say anything to you like that?” I asked.

That’s what remained stuck in my craw. That late-night incident with Kano.

He showed up in the dead of night, disguised himself as Momo in an attempt to trick me, then transformed into Ayano and disappeared somewhere.

My exhaustion at the time made me wonder if it was just some weird fever dream. The thought still seemed plausible enough.

There was no way Kano knew who Ayano even *was*, for that matter. I never mentioned her to these guys. And if I was curled up on the floor last night, why did I wake up on the sofa? Things didn’t really add up, realistically speaking.

But even though I logically knew all of that...it was *such* a real dream. Nauseatingly so.

It didn’t exactly make me comfortable, asking Kido something like this, but I wanted some more convincing proof that it was just my mind playing tricks on me.

Kido’s chopsticks stopped. She turned toward me.

“Did he say something to you yesterday?”

She twisted the gas heater off behind her, then crossed her arms, chopsticks still in one hand.

Maybe she gleaned from my voice that this topic deserved her full

attention. She flashed me a slightly concerned expression.

“N-no, um...Not exactly. I mean, I’m still not entirely sure it wasn’t just some super-realistic dream or something. He can’t, like, read your mind or anything, can he?”

“Nuh-uh. Nothing like that. Plus, I think Kano likes you pretty well, so...I don’t remember anything that would’ve put him off against you.”

Kido’s eyes turned downward. Now she looked a touch forlorn.

As far I could tell from her behavior, she didn’t seem to be lying.

I kind of doubted Kano enjoyed any powers his long-term roommate wouldn’t have been aware of by now. And given his usual goofy, airheaded behavior, I wouldn’t figure he had *that* much of a cruel streak, either.

Must’ve been just another of the many vivid dreams I’ve had lately. The thought took a heavy weight off of my shoulders.

“I mean, you know how he behaves and all by now, so...I know the act can get kind of old after a while, but he’s really a sweet guy, deep down. I hope he doesn’t get too annoying, or...”

Now Kido was clearly looking forlorn. Her eyes dipped downward again.

“Dahh! No, it’s nothing like that! Really! I guess I had a bad dream last night after running around all day, you know? I couldn’t just hate him like that. Besides, he’s taking care of my sister, too.”

This brightened Kido up. “Really? Well, great,” she said, smiling a little.

The combination of the apron, the smell from the scrambled eggs, and the smile made my chest tighten. This was one serious act of woman-ry. It would have blown away your average virgin. *Better*

keep my guard up.

“...Yeah, so, uh, sorry to bother you. Thanks for cooking breakfast, though. I’ll clean up afterward.”

“Sure thing. I’m pretty good at this stuff, so...”

Kido went back to her cooking. The combination of her grin as she turned around, her ponytail, and her apparent talent in the kitchen was like a wave-beam attack on my mind, one strong enough to almost defeat an elite-level virgin like myself, but I managed to stand my ground.

Better head back to the sofa and wait for breakfast.

Now I’m glad I brought it up. The misgivings I endured alone were all but gone now, replaced by a rumbling, empty stomach.

Not much to do until breakfast is ready, though. Might as well keep Ene entertained for a bit.

Been a while since I was motivated to do that, I thought, as I approached the sofa. There I saw a large, white ball of fluff perched on the seat, like a particularly hefty and aggressive barnyard sheep.

It had my phone in one hand, the other fervently jabbing away at the screen.

“...Mari, what’re you doing?”

Mari, startled, turned in my direction.

Her light pink eyes clashed against her lily-white skin and fleecy, frilly pajamas. At this range, she was finally beginning to look at least somewhat human.

Her normally bushy hair was even more disheveled than usual. She must have just risen from bed.

Whether out of friendship or because I really posed that little of a threat, Mari had already abandoned all sense of caution around me. *Hopefully it's the former.*



“Shintaro...That girl with all the blue hair ’n all isn’t showing up.”

Without any further apology, she started pecking at the phone again.

“Ene? Here, lemme see.”

I took the phone from Mari and tried pushing the power button a few times. No response.

“...Oh, yeah, I haven’t recharged this since yesterday.”

Looking back, this phone had to put up with Ene’s rantings and ravings all day yesterday. She must’ve totally exhausted the battery. Poor guy.

I didn’t have anything like a recharger with me, but judging by how long it lasted yesterday, someone here must’ve charged it for me the day before that.

Maybe Momo asked someone for an adapter she could borrow or something.

“Is...she dead?”

The momentous question came from a visibly shaking Mari. I somehow doubted a dead phone would be enough to off her.

“Nah. It’ll take more than this to do her in, trust me. She’ll come back once we charge it up.”

“Charge it up?”

“Um? You know...We have to plug this into an outlet so it can get some more electricity. Otherwise, it won’t work.”

“Hohh,” Mari replied, eyes sparking. “She eats some weird stuff!”

What was *with* this perfect statuette of innocence and purity? —

Great. My mind's going all weird again.

Using my indomitable spirit to tame the evil thoughts bubbling from some dark enclave of my heart, I turned to Mari, successfully keeping it all bottled up.

“Mari, do you know where the adapter for this is, maybe? Kido must plug her phone in somewhere, too, right?”

Mari thought for a moment, then had a burst of inspiration.

“Ummmm...Oh! You mean that thin rope thingy?”

There was a fairly substantial difference between a rope and a phone charger, but that was probably it.

“Right, that thingy. Could you bring that over for me?”

“Sure! Okay!”

With that, she stood up and padded toward the hutch behind the sofa.

It was laden with a motley crew of bric-a-brac, from old-looking books to eerie-looking bits of pottery, with a few retro toys thrown in for good measure. I had trouble telling whose tastes in interior design I was witnessing here.

I had a hazy image of Kido being responsible for this, but Kano might have a keen eye for this kind of stuff, too.

Mari pawed through this antique shop of misfits, nearly knocking the whole thing over as she rifled through drawers chanting “Rope... rope...”

Who was this girl? You just can't help but want to protect her...

Delicate as a lily, but so innocent and guileless. No description could have fit her better.

Compared to my sister, tromping around and grunting like a heavily armored tank, she was so, so much more feminine.

...No, no, no. I am such a virgin. I'm losing all sense of rationality.

Thanks to my total lack of interaction with the opposite sex, I've turned into the kind of man liable to cross the line at the slightest of provocations.

As an elite-level virgin, this was seriously bad news.

I have to regain my wits. My hermit's will.

Mari, oblivious of this inner struggle, was having some trouble of her own. That happy rope song of hers was gone, replaced with an increasingly desperate-sounding groan.

"Hey, if you can't find it, you don't have to keep looking forever, okay? Besides, she's just gonna start yelling at me again once she's back, so I don't mind at all if..."

As I spoke, Mari turned around and pouted at me.

"Why are you so *mean* to her?!"

My shoulders shuddered in the sizzle of this icy-hot burn. Being shaken by this girl reminded me yet again of what a wimp I was.

Mari could barely keep it together around me when we first met. Now she was acting surprisingly forceful.

She must have opened her heart to me a little. It wasn't a bad feeling.

"It's lonely, being by yourself. She has to be the same, too."

Then she started scrounging around the hutch again, cheeks still puffed up in anger.

Ene must have gotten on her good side, judging by that act. I never liked Ene much normally, but I suppose I could have predicted they'd hit it off.

I should have picked up on that the moment she saw Ene...and expressed no surprise whatsoever at her.

Most normal people would pelt me with questions like "how does this girl work" and "who developed this thing" and so on.

If *I* was confronted with Ene, that's what I'd almost certainly do.

But to these guys, all pretty far off the beaten path themselves, there wasn't much point in trying to explain oneself. That kept everyone on the same, fairly friendly level.

Looking at it like that, I realized I had a lot to be thankful for right now.

"Great news, huh?"

I spoke softly as I rubbed the powerless phone's screen.

I don't know where it came from, but somewhere along the line, I guess I developed an affinity for Ene.

Her appearing in front of me, all alone in my room, could very well be my salvation when all's said and done.

Running into all these guys, and opening up to them like I have, was kind of her doing, in a way.

"Shintaro, I found it! The charger! Wait just a second, okay? It's kind of deep inside..."

I looked up to find Mari, hands buried deep in the hutch, trying to pull out the charger she found.

The heavy piece of furniture began to rock, making the collection perched on it wobble and clatter.

“Whoa, watch out, Mari. Take it nice and slow, okay?”

“Yeah. I’m okay, I’m okay...Oof!”

Mari extracted her hand from the clutter. The cable from the charger was clutched in it.

I was a bit worried about what we’d do if she really *did* pluck a plain old rope out from that mess, but it looked like my guess was correct.

“Ooh, nice! That’s the one! Thanks a lot.”

“Ee-hee-hee,” Mari said as she tilted her head at me, a bit bashfully.

Yep. She’s a cutie.

By the time Mari finally untangled the cord and padded her way back to me with it, Kido was just beginning to bring her breakfast plates out from the kitchen.

“All ready...Ooh, you’re up, Mari? Good job waking up by yourself.”

“Mm-hmm! Oh, and Shintaro said I was good, too. I found the charger for him!”

Mari held the charger high in the air, beaming. Something long and beltlike was tangled around the far end of the cord, something I had failed to notice from behind the sofa.

I couldn’t discern what it was at first, but the moment I did, I froze.

Simultaneously, Kido let out a shrill “Aiee!” and disappeared as my eyes were focused on Mari.

“Oh, what’s that? It was caught on it.”

Mari grabbed the object knotted to the end of the cord and gave it a studious look.

“Uh, dude, that’s a snakeskin! Why do you have something like *that* in there?”

“Huh? Why...? I dunno why. I think Kano brought it in from somewhere...Agh! Kido, what’s wrong? Are you crying?”

Mari was talking into thin air. She must’ve been able to see her. Interesting.

Kido’s “concealing eyes” skill was pretty helpful at times. It allowed her to reduce her presence to a bare minimum at will, keeping people from recognizing or even noticing she was there.

For it to work, though, all other eyes had to be off her at the moment she chose to “disappear.” Mari never stopped looking at her, which must have been why she never noticed anything amiss.

“I-I’m sorry, Kido...Hmm? Does your stomach hurt?”

The look of concern was clear on Mari’s face, even as she still clutched the snakeskin in her hand.

Even though I still had no idea where she was, I had a pretty clear picture of her current state. Crouched over in mental anguish, no doubt.

“M-Mari? I don’t think Kido likes that snakeskin, okay?”

“This one? Uh, is that true, Kido? ...Oh. Okay. I’ll put it back.”

The child then padded back to the hutch and hid the snakeskin behind a rather large model of a three-wheeled antique car. Kido must have told her to do that.

“Weirdo,” Mari muttered. None of this likely made sense to her.

“Hey, Kido, you okay?”

I tried talking into the empty space near us. I was rewarded with silence. She probably didn’t want me seeing her quivering in tears.

“She said ‘just a second,’” Mari said, interpreting for me after returning from the hutch.

For the second time since yesterday’s haunted house, her propensity for being spooked into submission at the drop of a hat made me wonder why *she* was the boss of this gang.

I mean, when it comes to freaking out over stuff, I consider myself something of a pro. But from what I knew about her, Kido was an all-star at it.

Having nothing better to do, I took the cable from Mari and waited for Kido to come back as I started charging the phone.

Mari and I sat there for a few minutes until Kido appeared from thin air with zero advance warning.

I surmised that it wasn’t the exertion of using her skill that made her eyes red and puffy.

“S-sorry to keep you. Ready for breakfast?”

I nodded and said “Yeah” as she awkwardly smiled. It was a bit late for her to pretend it was nothing, but I didn’t want to add insult to injury.

Making several trips back and forth, Kido had her breakfast menu out in the main room in the blink of an eye.

We were greeted with scrambled eggs, salt-grilled salmon, toasted seaweed sheets, *natto* soybeans—everything you’d expect for breakfast in Japan from a kind old grandmother.

“Wow. This is, like, the epitome of down-home cooking.”

“Oh? Well, it’s pretty much the routine around here.”

Kido placed a rice cooker on the side table as she replied.

This eminently traditional Japanese breakfast? In the middle of a hideout I could only describe as “atmospheric”? Consumed by *this* kind of crew?

It was a bizarre sight to picture.

I grumbled to myself about how a Western-style breakfast would’ve been more fitting, but the appetite-inducing aroma from Kido’s handmade miso soup made any lingering doubts instantly fly off.

Struck by the urge to slurp away at once, I suddenly noticed that there were only four settings on the table.

Just enough for the four people I had seen so far this morning. Not enough for Seto, Momo, and Hibiya, none of whom had emerged into the living room yet.

“Hm? Hey, uh, shouldn’t we wake the other guys up or something? They shouldn’t have to miss out on breakfast just because they overslept...”

“Oh, Momo and the other guys? I think they already went out.”

Kido placed her bowl on the desk, fished a folded piece of paper out of a pocket, and handed it to me with a nod.

I opened it up, not knowing what to expect. I was greeted with a child’s scrawl, like a line of ancient hieroglyphs on a wall painting somewhere.

I thought it was a secret code at first, but—just barely managing to spot the “Momo” signature on the bottom—I realized that this eerie message from beyond was from my sister.

“God, her handwriting’s messy...”

I couldn’t help but say it out loud.

“Yeah,” Kido followed. “I’d be kind of worried about her education

at that level, but...let's just interpret it as artistic license, huh?"

Once I realized whose hand I was reading, the rest of the message became clear much more quickly.

The general gist was, *Hibiya and I are out looking for a girl named Hiyori. I'll contact you if anything comes up, but we'll be back for dinner.*

"Hiyori's the girl Hibiya talked about, right? They're out pretty damn early looking for her..."

"Well, they fell asleep early last night, so...Seto probably went with 'em, too. They probably didn't want to leave him alone."

Kido stood up and hurried over to the front entrance, no doubt trying to figure out what to do with the still-unconscious man by the door.

"Hey, how long you plannin' on lying there? You wanna get up?"

"Ngh...mmh, I'm fine..."

Konoha's loose, stilted reply came in the trademark growling drone of a non-morning person.

It's fair to say that someone refusing to wake up is far more preferable to someone unconsciously replying to you as he stayed asleep.

I shot a look toward the door, dreading what may have to come next. But despite my expectations, the moment Kido said "We got food," Konoha shot upward.

"Morning."

"Yeah, good morning. Go take a seat. We're eating."

The two of them came back together, Kido sitting next to Mari and Konoha settling beside me.

“Seto’s gone, too?”

“Yeah, he sent a text earlier. He had work.”

“So this is all of us?”

“Yep, I guess so.”

There was no restraining my empty stomach any longer. I picked up a pair of chopsticks and placed my hands together in a gesture of thanks.

“Time to eat!”

We all began ferrying food to our mouths, each in our own unique way. Konoha, despite having just woken up, was chomping away at a remarkable clip.

It was all pretty simple fare—fish, eggs, miso soup—but none of it tasted bland or boring to me. Kido must have a talent after all.

And the amiable, nonconfrontational flavoring she added to the dishes was, in its own way, very Kido-like as well.

“You mind if I have some more?”

Konoha thrust his bowl toward Kido. Not a single grain of rice remained inside.

I doubted my own eyes at this sight, taking place not even a minute after we began eating. *What kind of digestive system does this dude have?*

“Oh, sure. Eat all you want.”

Kido, supremely satisfied, took the bowl, filling it with about twice the amount of rice as before.

She grinned evilly as she handed it back, all but saying “Well? Can’t get enough, can you?” with her eyes.

This was enough to make the normally inscrutable Konoha betray a look of captivation. If it were framed and drawn just right, it'd be scene right out of a girl's comic.

We had to get through a lot to reach this point, but a nice meal with the gang isn't so bad after all.

I reflected a bit as I sipped my miso soup. It felt like a great morning, thanks in no small part to our health-conscious menu. Then I noticed Mari trying to peel the skin off of her salmon.

You wouldn't normally eat that part, no. Not that it ever stopped Momo, of course. Though if *she* ate something, that definitely couldn't be the norm for everyone else.

Mari was doing an awfully thorough job at skinning this fish, though.

So intent she was at her work, delicately picking and pecking at the filet, that it left me staring at her plate in wonder. Once the skin was off, Mari picked it up, a satisfied look on her face, and thrust it right at mine.

"Shintaro, look, look! It's just like that snakeskin!"

This unforeseen announcement made Kido, chewing her rice to the side, emit a baleful *oooorggh*.

It must have been a painful blow, especially after the trauma of just a few minutes ago, but I doubted Mari meant anything sinister by it.

"M-Mari! Come on, you really shouldn't play with your food like..."

I tried to make her stop as softly as I could, having trouble finding the right words. Kido nodded briskly in response.

"Aww, but I got it just right and everything."

Mari returned the skin to her table, put her chopsticks down, and

gave us a crestfallen look.

Everything about her suggested that the mere sight of a reptile would make her faint on the spot. But here she was, displaying a much thicker skin than I expected.

Even if it was childish of them, most women don't want to go near cold-blooded animals like that. Although Momo asked if we could keep a chameleon at home once. *Though if she wants one, that definitely can't be the norm.*

"You really don't mind those kinds of things, huh, Mari? You're still a little girl and all, too."

"I'd say so," Kido muttered to the side as she blended some more *natto* into her rice. "She was living by herself in the mountains before she came here. It'd take a lot more than a snake to spook *her*."

The matter-of-fact tone she took suggested that her observation was nothing particularly noteworthy. I had to bite.

"By herself? In the mountains? *Her?! Come on.* Where were her parents or...?"

The moment I said the word, Mari's shoulders shook, her hands forming two fists on her knees.

Territory I wasn't supposed to tread into, I supposed. *That* was sure inconsiderate of me.

Regret began to form in my soul as I opened my mouth, attempting to apologize. But before I could, Mari slowly began to speak.

"Daddy died when I was real small. I was with my mommy after that. But I didn't do what Mommy told me to do. I went out, and there were these scary people, and they probably took Mommy away somewhere."

“Wh-what do you mean...?”

“Um, well, my daddy wasn’t like this, but ever since she was born, Mommy’s eyes were bright red, and she said we were like the Medusa that you see in the picture books. She said people outside were afraid of us, ’cause we’re different. And that’s why Mommy said I shouldn’t go out, but...I did anyway...”

Her speech silenced the room. Even Konoha, still packing away the food like a well-oiled machine, stopped in rapt attention.

Was that why she lived by herself?

From the tone of her story, it sounded like Mari’s family was persecuted in some way by the people around them.

Maybe they were called Medusa to their faces, even.

Kido told me that Mari had the power to make anyone she looks eyes with freeze temporarily.

That was nothing any normal human could do. If the general public found out about it, I could understand why they’d treat her with fear and scorn.

“Mari...”

Kido broke the silence.

“That’s the first time you ever really told anyone, isn’t it?”

Apparently I wasn’t the only one surprised by the tale.

“Y-yeah. I guess having more friends...It makes me feel safer. I don’t think it’s so scary for me to say it anymore.”

Mari flashed a fleeting smile.

It made sense. Mari hadn’t been here for that long, the way I heard it. She must not have talked about herself much before now.

“Oh. Well, that’s great. I doubt anyone filed a...missing-persons report for you, huh? ...Oh, hell.”

The anger was clear on Kido’s face. She must have had the same thought I did.

If Mari’s mother had those “red eyes,” she must have had the same kind of powers this gang all possessed.

And if Mari was still with us after presumably being kidnapped when she went outside, she must have protected Mari from people in the outside world. In other words, she acted the scapegoat so she could live in peace. That made sense.

If her mother was killed in the process, that was one thing. But if she was “taken away” instead—that implied there was something in this for the people on the outside besides purely defending their own hides.

A man’s curiosity can be so easily stoked by the bizarre at times.

This was pure guesswork, but perhaps it meant Mari’s mother was taken away by those with more malevolent things on their mind than simply murder. Someone seeking to profit from their situation, somehow.

The thought made a dull feeling of disgust manifest itself inside of me.

Mari and her mother were living all by themselves, trying to cling to whatever happiness they had left.

And despite that, not only did no one lend a helping hand to them—they ripped them apart from each other. It was horrifying to think of.

“How could they *do* that to her...?”

My genuine feelings poured out of my mouth.

It was nothing I'd ever be able to understand. Before she came here, Mari was all alone, by herself, never cared for by anyone.

When she talked about Ene being all lonely...she must have meant it. Seriously.

I felt the emotions clutch at my stomach, incapable of going anywhere else.



I tried to process them in my mind—"there has to be something I can do for her"—but the idea was promptly crushed by my overall sense of powerlessness.

"Do you remember any of the faces of the guys who took her? Any kind of unique features at all?"

"...I don't really remember. It was a real long time ago, and one of them knocked me out, so I didn't see their faces. And when I woke up, they and my mom were gone..."

Mari looked part perturbed, part apologetic. I couldn't blame her. She was a victim of a violent crime. At such a young age, too.

"All right...Do you remember how long ago it was, at least?"

Mari hemmed and hawed to herself, trying to remember, before answering.

"Ummm, well, I used to like counting the summers, and there's been a hundred or so of 'em, so I think it's been around a hundred years. But I forgot to count them after that, so it might be more, but..."

Mm. Makes sense. I'd have trouble remembering things from a hundred years ago, too. Even just a few years ago can be pretty tough some— "A hundred years?!"

The words shot out of my and Kido's mouth in perfect unison.

A hundred years?

There was no way that could be possible.

If a hundred people heard this girl say "I'm a hundred or so years old," the reply would unanimously be along the lines of "Bwa-ha-ha! Aww, isn't that cute?"

“Eeek! I’m sorry!” Mari replied, shrugging her shoulders in response to our dual reactions.

“Y-you’re joking, right? I mean, a hundred is just too...You don’t *look* like it, so...”

“No! I’m telling the truth! My mom taught me how to count and everything! Oh, but when I asked her how old I was, she got angry and said ‘Don’t talk to me about age anymore,’ so I wouldn’t really know unless I counted, so...”

Mari defended herself in a clearly peeved tone, but this still wasn’t something we could just say “Okay, we believe you” to.

Still, given that we were currently sharing the room with The Amazing Invisible Woman, I couldn’t deny it out of hand either.

Kido, for her part, furrowed her brows in confusion.

“Yeah, but that kind of thing...”

The ability to live past a century. Mad Mari stumbled across the power of immortality somehow?

No. That’s just silly.

That kind of thing couldn’t possibly exist...

Just then Kido’s story from yesterday crossed my mind. How she gained her own skills.

It was the same with Kano, Seto, and Momo. They had a near-death experience...and then they awoke to their powers.

And judging by Hibiya’s behavior yesterday, it must’ve happened to him, too.

But Mari, meanwhile, claims that she was born with those eyes of hers. She clearly took a different path from the rest of them.

“Hey, uh, Mari? So were you really born with your powers?”

“Hmm? Um...uh-huh. My mom always told me. She said ‘Oh, don’t you ever go using that, Mari’...”

This was becoming more and more cryptic.

Yesterday’s conversation gave me a fairly clear impression of how these powers...happened. But Mari was such an extreme case, it made everything else fall apart.

The fact she had that power from the start. Without going to...*that* world.

The fact that her mother was awakened to her skills, too.

And the fact that I’m sharing a roof with a one-hundred-year-old Medusa.

It was a bewildering fairy tale. Were there really all these bizarre events taking place worldwide? We were practically tripping over them.

All of the strange and mysterious things I’d seen or heard of, including the traumatic experiences of Kido and the others, seemed to all boil down to a single...thing. A thing that’d lasted over a hundred years.

But if it was all related, then solving the riddle behind Mari’s story could be one way to arrive at the big answers we needed.

Even if we tried searching for Mari’s mother, though, it’d be a daunting task. Calling the police and saying “We’re looking for the mother of this girl here; she went missing a hundred years ago” wouldn’t accomplish much.

That, and Mari’s memories were a little too hazy to seem reliable. It was hard to say what the next step should— “Um...I just had this thought...”

Out of nowhere, Konoha raised a wavering hand as I stewed in my confusion.

“Oh? What’s up?”

Kido looked a little surprised at this unexpected statement.

Konoha, his expression inscrutable as always, slowly began to speak.

“This might not be anything important, but would it be okay to maybe try going to this girl’s home?”

“Huh?”

Kido and I looked at him, perplexed.

“No, I, uh, I was just wondering if it’d be bad to check out her home. Oh, I don’t mean her home *here*. The place she was living before. Um...”

“That’s *it*!”

Kido and I exclaimed in unison, cutting off Konoha just as he found himself at wit’s end attempting to conclude his thought.

Thinking about it, it made sense.

If Mari’s mother referred to the both of them as Medusa, she must have had some kind of knowledge of her own abilities.

Even if it didn’t lead to the big answers we sought, we might still find some info on these powers in Mari’s house.

“I think it’d be worth our time to check out. Shintaro, how about you?”

“I’d say it’s about the only thing we got. Maybe it’ll help us find an answer to all this stuff that happened to you all.”

This startled Konoha. “D-do you think it’ll help us rescue Hiyori, too, maybe?” he said breathlessly.

“I can’t really say yet...but maybe we could find some hints, at least.”

Konoha’s face clearly began to grow sterner.

Looking back, that was about the only thing Hibiya yelled at him about yesterday.

He said that Konoha failed to rescue this girl named Hiyori. Maybe that really moved Konoha after all, although it never registered on his face.

“Well, if we’re going, let’s go. Mari, do you mind showing your place to us a little bit?” Kido stood up as she spoke.

“For you guys, it’s not a problem at all,” Mari replied with a smile.

“Cool. In that case, let’s get this cleaned up. I don’t want Kido to do all the work, so lemme clear the...”

I tried standing up as I spoke, forgetting exactly how sore my legs still were.

I froze in a semicrouching position, not wanting to make the dull sense of pain get any worse.

Kido, probably picking up on this, flashed a spiteful grin. “Okay, I’ll start getting our stuff ready,” she said as she returned to her room. “I’ll be counting on you, Shintaro!”

Hang on a sec.

I know we kind of threw ourselves into this headlong, but I’m afraid I forgot something important.

This shade of uncertainty began to write itself large in my mind, its

importance now all too obvious. I cautiously turned toward Mari.

“Uh, Mari? Where was your home, anyway?”

She grinned back. “It’s kind of far away from here. In a forest! I think maybe two hours’ walking from the station?”

I crumpled off my feet and to the ground.

Two hours?!

No. No, no, no. Not happening. I was a ninety-pound weakling already. How much walking did I have to *do*, day after day?

I’m out.

Yep. I’m out.

Better go to Kido’s room and tell her—

“But oh, boy, we’re going out today, *too*? This is going to be great, Shintaro! Oh, and, uh, is he coming along, too? I can’t wait!”

Mari smiled from ear to ear.

I don’t think anyone could have said “no” to a smile like that.

“Oh...yeah. Me neither...”

I felt my face start to twitch as I dragged myself back up to the sofa.

But the girl’s enthusiasm reminded me that my phone should be charged by now.

When I unplugged it from the outlet nearby, the phone indicated it had nearly a full charge. Though, when I turned on the power, I realized something was odd.

“...Huh?”

I didn't see Ene in the middle of the screen.

I tried shaking it, muttering “Helloooooo?” a few times, but she still didn't show up.

She must have been paying a visit to Momo's phone.

This was a girl who survived me picking up my computer and dropping it on the floor. No way she'd simply disappear over a dead phone.

I slipped it into my pocket, fully satisfied by my own logic.

With a deep breath, I looked across the table in front of me.

First, I gotta clear this table. Then, we got another long hike ahead. Both concepts filled me with dread, but there was no point whining about it now.

It was weird, though, these past few days. *Like it's all been a special curriculum designed to re-form me into a decent human being.*

Maybe someone really *did* devise all of this for me.

Someone with the power to mess around with people's destinies, or something...

I smiled to myself a bit. The thought seemed oddly comforting.

What a crazy situation I'm in.

If I wasn't experiencing it for myself, I'd laugh it off with a chiding “Yeah, right.”

But here I am. Filled with an oddly passionate desire to get to the bottom of all this.

For the sake of...someone.

It wouldn't help me atone for anything I'd done in the past.

But still, if there's anything I can do right now, I guess I need to try and take the plunge.

I thought it over as I began cleaning up the fully eaten breakfast.

REAPER RECORD II

“I *told* you, if you won’t let me in, then bring that man here at once!”

Around the old brick gate, people gradually began to gather, no doubt curious about the excitement.

That bald-faced, tasteless sense of urgency that appears whenever a crowd forms. There was nothing I liked about it.

Even inside the gate, people were watching down at us from the windows of the stately mansion. Servants, probably.

“No, but...My dear, you know I can’t just hear that and say ‘Oh, certainly, yes.’”

The scrawny-looking man, talented in little apart from making himself look all prim and proper in front of others, smiled a thin smile, clearly treating me like a fool.

“Then what do you want me to do? Listen. I’ve gone through the most horrible experience thanks to that guy. He said he knew everything about me, so I shut up and did whatever he told me to do...and now that I’ve been handed over to these crazy people, I’m treated like some kind of animal, and I even took a lead ball to the stomach.”

Who the hell is this guy?

His lukewarm, waffling attitude made me want to scream.

Plus, it took me several weeks to walk back here, along this path. I was on a wagon last time. *Where do they get off, treating me like this?*

“Ah-ha-ha! My lady, listen to me...If a cannonball hit you, then I

very much doubt you should be here at all.”

“What? What are you talking about? I’m here right now!”

The scrawny man took a breath, then laughed with all the power his lungs could muster. I could hear the rest of the people around us begin to snicker themselves, taking the cue.

My stomach began to churn with the fires of annoyed rage.

Why do all the creatures here have this knack for riling me up?

I considered leaving the premises immediately, but then this entire journey would be a waste of time.

No matter what it took, I knew there was no getting rid of this seething feeling until I asked that rotund little man about “myself.”

“Look, if we’re just gonna keep doing this all day, then I’m going in whether you like it or not. Who are you, anyway? I’m not here to talk to you—”

Just as I took a breath, ready to push this annoyance aside and storm into the mansion, I saw the man himself peeking at me through an upstairs window.

My return had apparently caused him to take fright.

The look of fear on his face as he stared on was written clearly across his entire face.

Seeing him, knowing full well I was here but still opting to watch me from his safe hideout, caused the rage boiling within me to finally explode.

“Him...!”

I wrapped my hands around the iron fence surrounding the gate. “Stop!” the scrawny man said. “Stop at once! I am done playing with

you!”

“...You think I’m still ‘playing’ now?!”

My anger was already at its peak.

The blathering of the scrawny man before me no longer had any power to slow me.

But the man never intended to physically intervene himself.

From the crowd, now grown to the point where it filled the road in front of the gate, several men appeared, iron swords sheathed by their sides.

“I did not wish to do this...but this is all because you refuse to listen to reason! Do you understand, my lady? Please, just give this up at... eep...”

Aha. So that’s how it is. Rotten to the core, all of them.

In an instant, the heat began to pump itself into both of my eyes as they glared at the man.

His eyeballs, after matching gazes with mine, twitched and thrashed about for a few seconds, then stopped dead. The rest of his body quietly followed suit immediately afterward.

I then turned toward the crowd.

They looked vacant, bewildered, unable to comprehend the situation they were in.

“You! What did you do to him?”

One of the men brought a hand to the hilt of his sword as he edged closer to me.

“Sword.”

An object created by mankind to kill others.

One swipe from its wielder was enough to split muscle, to crush bone.

I came to understand that all too well after I left the cavern. Painfully so.

And I knew, generally, that this world was already one giant piece of property to them. Such foolish creatures they all were.

“Answer me now, or I will treat you as hostile and take suitable action!”

Agghh. Simply exasperating. Why, after all this time, are these people still expecting something from me?

I closed my eyes, my vision filling with darkness.

When was the last time I used this?

It must have been at one church or the other, when I was forced to act as a “god” around some people. That earned me nothing as well.

Or perhaps not.

Every single time, the only things I gained from these people were contempt and hopelessness.

And yet this time as well my heart was filled with a ridiculous sense of hope.

Opening my eyes, I saw a man brandishing a sword at me.

An attempt to take my life? No matter who it was, it always came down to that.

“Captivating...eyes.”

The moment I muttered it, the man froze.

The mindless chatter from the crowd behind him disappeared.

As it should. Everyone here, after all, was locking eyes with me.

There, lined up before me, were the faces of men and women suddenly thrown into a state of horror. They must not have been expecting this. Pitiful, foolish, and completely beyond saving.

The thoughts of the man brandishing the sword—"Who the hell is this...?"—flashed across my mind. I did not invite it in.

It was proving a serious encumbrance, not being able to control this "stealing" ability of mine.

But who could, in my shoes? The more I looked into the thought processes of humans, the more it rankled me.

It would have been nice, actually, if I could go around and look directly into everyone's heads like that.

That way, at least I could tell at a glance whether they were lying to me or not.

But the minds of these people were buried in a putrid mishmash of sheer nonsense.

It was all but impossible to pick out only the things I wanted to know from them.

That would be much like attempting to find a small pebble in a vast mountain of garbage.

"I suppose you'd call me a monster, wouldn't you?" I said to the frozen crowd. There was no reply.

Silence.

This silence always awaited me at the end of it all.

A cold, cold silence, just like way back when. By this point, I loathed it.

I turned toward the mansion. The fat man staring out the window was gone.

Must have fled through some passageway or another.

He might tell me something if I chased him and threatened him enough, but I was no longer in the mood.



How much longer do I have to keep doing this?

It felt like I was just silently plodding along, even though I was fully aware there was no light beyond the endless darkness.

I knew that long before now. I knew that, yet I kept going.

But every time I had the thought:

“There’s nobody in this world who knows about me.”

The tears would begin to well up.

My mind would be overwhelmed with irrational thoughts. “I can’t stand this,” and so on.

Thus, I had to keep going.

If I didn’t, it almost felt like my thoughts would push me over the brink and I’d disappear entirely.

But there was no end for me.

I had experienced death many times before, but it never brought me to an end.

The immobile man posed in front of me had no thoughts left in his mind.

He was simply there, stilled, in all his splendor.

Maybe it’d be easier for me if I could be like that.

Not having to think about anything. Just being there.

I realized that tears were coming out of both my eyes.

Trying to stop them did nothing. It was even getting hard to breathe.

“Ngh...ahhh, ahhhhhh...!”

If there's something out there that created me, hurry up and show yourself to me.

Show up, and put an end to this.

The tears kept welling out until sundown as I prayed for that release.



The summer breeze rustled through the trees, the birdsong echoing among the leaves.

Last night's rain made the road rough going.

The thick forest growth prevented the sun's powerful rays from exacting their full force upon me, but the heat that lapped at my body drained my strength at an astonishing rate.

Something I noticed after obtaining a body like this and running into assorted creatures is that I was overwhelmingly deficient in a number of bodily functions.

Just walking a little caused me to break out in a sweat. And attempting to climb a hill made all the joints in my body want to scream.

I was sweating from head to toe now, in fact, and my legs felt like they were going to break off.

I tried to keep going. I had made it this far, after all. But the punishing effort had started to make my eyes tear up again.

Well, if it's tough, it's tough. Pain causes tears, and there's nothing I can do about that.

“It shouldn’t be far now...”

The “captivate” ability I had been using for a while now might be one reason I was as exhausted as I was.

But if this was meant to be some kind of guidepost for me, I had trouble understanding it.

I was, at least, making forward progress, and I could feel the presence of creatures around me fade away before my eyes.

“Captivate” was proving to be useful.

I could clearly feel who was looking where—what they were focused on—and I could force them to turn toward me instead.

Using this, in other words, allowed me to track down the least noticeable spot in the world. I thought that was a pretty clever trick.

On that day, the last time I was betrayed by the humans, I resolved that I would live by myself, somewhere that no one would notice.

I considered a cave at first, but to be frank, I couldn’t take the dark any longer.

I pondered over other potential decent locales as well, but it made me realize that most of the very quietest parts of the world are also the darkest. It enraged me.

After all, the darkness sickened me at this point. I could never coop myself up in there again.

But as the humans began to trample their way across this world, it soon dawned on me that it was almost impossible to find a perfectly isolated yet well-lit spot to call home.

And as I thought and thought about it, I came up with this idea: I used “focus” to find the spot in the world people paid the least

attention to.

It was here, in this forest. Remarkably bright, too.

I was fairly dubious at first, but I could tell. I could feel fewer and fewer creatures around me as I proceeded along.

It was strange. Like a great hole opened up in a single spot. Nobody's mind focused upon it.

I had yet to arrive at the exact locale, but realizing this filled me with a sense of gloating joy.

And who could blame me? I boarded a ship to cross the ocean, was thrown overboard after I caused some trouble, and finally swam all the way here, tears in my eyes.

I couldn't say how many times I drowned en route. That was the pain I endured on my way here. If it turned out to be teeming with humans, I probably would have set the entire forest aflame.

Continuing on, long past when the road ended and right when I noticed the birdsong could no longer be heard, I found an open patch in front of me a little ways.

What kind of place was this?

My pace quickened as I pushed myself forward. When I set foot into the clearing, I sighed.

It was as if the area had been completely forgotten by everyone that lived on this planet. Yet it continued to exist.

Any creatures with free will shunned this place. Nobody even deigned to notice it.

"This is perfect...!"

I could feel my spirits rally, an all too unfamiliar feeling as of late.

It was far, far quieter than I imagined. Brighter. Comfortable.

There was just enough clear land to build a house. That inherent coziness made me fall in love with it all the more.

Parting the low-growing grass with my feet, I gave standing in the middle of the clearing a shot. A warm, inviting silence, not the cold and inorganic one I once knew, filled my ears.

“Settled, then. From this day forward, this is where I belong.”

Come to think of it, ever since I took on this form, I had never lived in a permanent residence.

I was tirelessly wandering the world over, no particular destination in mind, so it could only be expected.

But now that I was here, I would need someplace to live. While I was hardly picky, if I was staying here, I would still need a roof over my head.

After all, when the rain falls on me, my body grows cold and shivers. I was terrible at dealing with that.

“A roof...? I doubt I could build an entire home by myself, but a roof and nothing else seems...lacking.”

Sitting down on an opportune rock I spotted in the clearing, I pondered over the next pressing question.

If I was living alone, I would hardly need a large residence. Just something that would keep the wind, the rain, and the sunlight away.

And defending myself against the sunlight came first. Heat was the only thing I couldn't conquer, no matter how much I tried. I didn't stand a chance.

Which means I would need to find some materials. Could I bring them here? No. No way. That was far too difficult a task. But I hated

the heat, and I hated the cold.

I thought this over, running through all the possible scenarios in my mind, when I suddenly noticed that the temperature dropped a fair amount while I was distracted.

Night must have fallen at some point.

Whenever I start thinking like this, I lose all track of time.

It was the one habit I always had that I just couldn't shake.

Oftentimes, several days would pass before I snapped out of my reverie.

Having the time pass like this, outside of my senses, made me feel like I, alone, was unhooked from the rest of the world. It wasn't a very reassuring feeling.

At least the days of me plunging into thought and the entire world getting redrawn around me were a thing of the past.

But just sitting here and thinking about a new residence would get me nowhere.

It was something I'd prefer to avoid on the whole, but unless I started moving, nothing was going to happen.

"Guess I gotta do it..."

"Do it? Do what?"

Well, build a house, of course.

Not that it has to be anything luxurious. As long as I can sit back and relax a...

My thoughts reached that point before I tumbled off the rock in a heap.

I looked up in a panic, only to find a white-haired guy standing right next to the rock I was sitting on. By human standards, he would be around sixteen or so.

He looked grubby, less than clean, but I doubted his outfit was his normal everyday wear. It looked like a soldier's uniform or something.

But that didn't matter.

What concerned me most of all was that this idyllic place of residence I found was violated, cruelly barged into by this man, surprising me into taking a fall off my sitting post. The anger I felt at it all made me feel like my insides were going to explode.

I stood up, carefully cracked my knuckles, and stared this interloper down.

"You...I hope you're ready to pay."

I had no intention of using my hands, of course. Physically speaking, I was fragile, hardly even a match for a young human child.

"Oh, uh, did I scare you? Sorry, sorry. You were so deep in thought over there, and then you spoke up out of nowhere. I just thought it was kind of funny, so..."

The slack-jawed man's attitude made my fists shake with fury. Not that I had any intention of using those fists, either.

"What's so funny to *you*, damn it?! Get out of my face! I'm trying my best to build my home in here! Just go away already!"

Even in the face of this violent tirade, the man's blank expression remained firm.

"Oh, okay! Building a home, huh? Well, did you need any help? 'Cause if you need anything, I'd be glad to lend a hand!"

What kind of stupid nonsense is this man babbling?

I just told him to go away, didn't I?

No, I definitely did. I tried to sound as hostile as I could, too.

So why is this frivolous fool acting like this? I struggled to understand.

“Are you insane? Even now, as we speak, you're plotting something against me, aren't you? Leave, now, before you regret it.”

This was far from the first person offering me feigned support. None of the offers were ever sincere. All of them tried to use me somehow.

And *he* was probably one of them, too. Who could ever trust *this* lunkhead?

“Huh?! Wait, no! No, nothing like that! I mean, I was kind of thinking it'd be nice if I could get a closer look at you, but...Oh, no, nothing as mean as that...”

The man scratched his head bashfully.

Who is this guy? He's touched in the head, isn't he?

Something about his behavior seemed out of whack. Maybe he was trying to throw me off guard.

And what did he mean by “get a closer look at you”?

No matter what he meant, I had no doubt he would soon have another one of those harebrained tall tales for me, just like every other human I've interacted with.

“I can't trust you. I've been tricked by people like you for ages. You'd have to be insane to trust anyone after what I've seen.”

“Ooh...Well, what can I do to help you trust *me*? I’d love to help you out, any way I can. I don’t need you to repay me or anything. In fact, if it’ll help, I’d be willing to do anything you say, starting right now.”

The man let a cautious exhale of breath out of his nose.

I thought about firing back with “You will? In that case, go away!” but then I had a better idea. If that was what he wanted, that was what he’d get.

It was a little mean of me, I supposed. But if it went as planned, it’d make *him* disappear, too. I lowered my voice to a whisper.

“...Anything I say, right?”

“Huh?! Of, of course! Are you willing to believe me now?!”

Walking past the beaming young man, I went a little distance and pointed toward the ground.

“Hmm? Why are you pointing down...?”

“Build a house here.”

The man froze for a moment, the smile still painted on his face. Then he began sweating profusely.

“Didn’t you hear me? Build a house right here.”

I repeated it, but there was no way he could’ve misheard me.

“I’ll do it!”

“And once you’re done, go away immediately. If you can’t, I won’t waste my time with you...”

“I’ll do it! I’ll do it!”

Figures. There was no way he could do it all by himself, of course.

And once he goes away, I can take my time and build exactly the...

“...Huh?”

“You heard me, right? I’d be happy to build a house for you! For you, that’d be nothing!”

The man smiled warmly at me.

The smile was still there, but given the beady sweat running down his head, it must have required a mighty effort.

This man really is touched.

Building a house by himself? Does he have any idea how much material, how much effort that would take?

Does he even know anything about home building? Even if he did, there was no fathoming his behavior right now.

...Maybe he’s just giving me a line. He might still be plotting something.

Stoking my suspicions, I peered intently at the man. His cheeks reddened in sudden embarrassment as he scratched his head.

He must like scratching his head with his right hand whenever he feels awkward. His body language was starting to sicken me.

“...All right. If you think you can do it, go ahead. I’m gonna have my eye on you until you do, got it?”

I tried to add some sarcasm to my threat. No matter what conspiracy he was trying to hatch, he couldn’t carry it out under *my* gaze.

It could be fun, in fact, watching him either admit defeat midway or turn his tail and flee.

“You, you’ll watch me...?”

The man looked elated at this revelation.

This continuous stream of incomprehensible behavior was really beginning to nauseate me.

It made no sense at all. I thought about peering into his head, but trying to delve into the brain of someone this off-kilter was less than appealing to me.

“Okay! Um, I’ll get to work tomorrow! ...So, what’s your name?”

“My name? I don’t have one.”

Name.

A kind of code used by humans to express their acknowledgment of each other.

Humans give meaningful names to their children at birth. Their children, in turn, referred to themselves by their names for life.

But that was a human custom. A foreign concept to me.

“Oh...okay. Well, I’ll give you mine then, okay? I’m Tsukihiko. Good to meet you!”

Tsukihiko, eh?

He was an utter fool, down to his bones. Whether he gave his name or not, all humans remained on the same level in my eyes.

Human. Nothing more, and nothing less. What would telling me *that* achieve?

Thinking about it, the man before my eyes didn’t seem to be demanding anything from me.

Such a creepy thing this is.

But letting this end in such a creepy, incomprehensible way seemed a waste to me.

Very well. Let's try to understand him. What he means, inside of his heart.

“Better not run away from me...human.”

Tsukihiko's bold, cloudless eyes beamed in response. “Of course not!” he replied.



CHILDREN RECORD IV

It was hell.

Other people might have their own opinions, but to me, at least, the journey couldn't be described any other way.

“Come on, Shintaro, how long're you gonna lie there?”

Kido spat the words at me as I sprawled out on the ground, finishing off the sports drink she bought along the way.

“Give me a break...I'm gonna die.”

My nostrils were filled with the fresh smell of summer from the carpet of grass I'd just tumbled onto.

It felt pleasant, sort of, thanks in part to the shade I was blessed with.

“Man, I can't get enough of this green grass...”

“Yeah, and I couldn't get enough of your barfing all over the ground, either. That's what you get for guzzling all that soda as an 'anti-heatstroke' measure.”

Kido's sharp rebuke made the newly sustained wound in my heart sting in response.

But I didn't care. *I like soda. To me, it's the elixir of life. If I need to keep myself hydrated, that's my first choice. It's water, right?*

Water that I expelled violently all over a nameless meadow earlier.

“H-heh, don't say that! I'm fragile goods, okay? You need to be delicate with me!”

“Hm. Sorry. Guess I kind of underestimated how much time this would take. I’ve been here before, so...”

Reaching this clearing required a train ride of about an hour from our hideout’s neighborhood station.

We had been walking for two and a half hours since then. It was a cruel, merciless death march, one designed to kill off any shut-in who dared attempt it.

I felt perfectly within my rights to vomit once or twice along the way.

It’s not my fault. It’s certainly not the soda’s fault. It’s all summer’s fault.

Though maybe not completely...

“Hey, Kido...? I know I’m borrowing these and all, but was this really the best clothing you had for me?”

I pointed at the mountain-climbing wear I was sporting.

“Hey, *you’re* the one who started whining about getting your hoodie all dirty. Sad to say, I don’t know what kind of clothes would be more suitable for the mountains than that.”

Kido sat down to my right as she spoke.

Maybe she was right. But *this* heavy gear in the dead of the summer?

At least get something lighter for me...

The more I thought about it, though, the more I realized how pointless it was to protest. This outfit was picked by a girl who was still wearing her long-sleeved hoodie out in the sun, after all.

“...What kind of crazy place did Mari even live in, though? There

isn't a single thing anywhere near us. What'd they do for food?"

"Yeah, I tried asking her about that, but...No. It's nuts."

Kido brought a hand to her forehead. Judging by that act, I could easily imagine what kind of off-the-wall reply Mari gave.

"You saying she didn't...?"

"...Yeah. Apparently. They took in fluids, but otherwise, nothing. Y'know, I *thought* she acted weirdly shocked at whatever we brought out for dinner when she first showed up, but..."

Mari, before our eyes, was turning into a complete enigma. They lived here, eating nothing, for over a hundred years? *If that isn't an enigma, what is?*

"I'm starting to wonder if Mari is some kinda mountain hermit or something."

"I was starting to think that myself. Though I doubt any hermit would last in this heat."

We were in the middle of a lush, flowering forest.

Though it was hard to tell where the middle was any longer, what with the twisty maze of paths and trails Mari guided us through. It all ended at her house, which Kido and I were currently grumbling at each other in front of.

"So now what? We gotta go in, right?"

"Well, we can't just barge in. Mari told us to stay outside until she got it cleaned up."

Out of all the inscrutable events descending upon me today, I wondered why Mari chose *this* moment to make me feel like I was visiting my girlfriend's house.

I suppose I should have been excited right then, my heartbeat

accelerating. But the mood was overwhelmingly lacking, somehow.

Just as I considered taking an afternoon nap to while away the time, Konoha's face entered my vision, peering down at me.

"What?"

"Oh, um..."

Konoha had lugged a gigantic backpack all the way from our hideout—"just in case there's something we should take back," he said. Along the way, Mari packed it full of drinks and other sundries, essentially turning him into the mule in this Grand Canyon expedition.

Given the extraordinary physical skills he showed off yesterday, it was probably nothing to him. But it still rankled my conscience.

"I just, erm..."

Konoha took a drink from his pack and passed it to me.

"You aren't looking too good, so...I was just wondering if you're okay."

I didn't immediately respond to this random act of kindness, but, realizing this was Konoha's way of expressing goodwill to his friends, I gladly accepted it.

"Oh, thanks. You better stay hydrated, too."

"Not too much, though," Kido said, pointing at me. "Otherwise you'll end up like him."

"Awwwhh, *leave* it, man! I *know* already!"

"Oh? Well, sorry, then."

Kido gave me a casual, nonironic pat on the shoulder.

This treatment was exhausting me. *Shut-ins like me are delicate creatures. The littlest change in lifestyle can be enough to wreck our health!* They could at least be a *tiny* bit kinder to me.

As we sniped at each other, Mari threw the front door open, craning her head out from the doorway. She wore a tinkling set of keys around her neck, pendant-style.

“Um, sorry I’m late. You can go in now!”

Then she disappeared behind the door again. She must have finished with the tidying up or whatever. Time to get down to today’s *real* business.

“Cool. Let’s move.”

I stood up. Kido followed me, stretching her arms out.

“Hopefully we’ll discover something new here.”

Our mission today, in general, was to gain some insight on our eye abilities, as well as the riddle behind Mari’s family line. If we could top that off with even a little info on the so-called “other world,” that’d be perfect.

If we could at least learn about Mari’s ancestry, that could help us find some new angles to think about. I brought a hand to the door.

“You think we’ll learn where Hiyori is?”

The words dribbled weakly from Konoha’s lips as he stood to the side.

“Mmm...Hard to say. We pretty much got nothing to go on right now...but I’d like to get some hints, at least. Don’t know until we search, right?”

I slapped Konoha on the back. He nodded briskly.

“Well, here we go...oh.”

As I opened the front door, I was greeted with what looked like a dollhouse blown up to people size.

The room was lined from end to end with bookshelves, each stuffed with dozens of old-looking tomes. I turned my head to and fro to take it all in.

“Huh. I like it. Nice atmosphere.”

Mari fidgeted as she looked toward the floor, happy or embarrassed or both.

“Mom said that my grandfather built this house.”

“Your grandfather? By himself?! That can’t be right, Kido.”

I turned toward Kido, who came in behind me. She took in the view, a look of childlike wonder like none I’d seen from her before erupting across her face.

“...Uh, didn’t you say you’ve been here before?”

“No! I mean, we didn’t go inside that time! But...wow, though. What a room...I’m so jealous, Mari...”

Kido’s flattering review was enough to make Mari say “Tee-hee! Thank you!” her voice still slightly abashed. “It’s been a while, though,” she continued as she plopped down on a window-side chair and took in the view outside.

Kido turned toward me, her face resolute.

“I gotta be honest with you, Shintaro—I wanna live here.”

“Um, that’d be kind of difficult, wouldn’t it?”

“Ohhhh, but...I could get food somewhere...”

Kido began muttering to herself.

Konoha, meanwhile, was already rifling through the bookshelves, his face as stern as I'd ever seen it.

He was contributing to the cause far more than our alleged boss right now.

I watched as Konoha extended a hand toward one volume. He must have found something.

Immediately, he turned toward Mari. "Can...can I see this book?!"

"Hm? Sure. You can read any one you want—"

"Thank you!"

Before Mari could finish, Konoha was already flipping through the pages, his face as stern as before.

"Uh...Hey, what'd you find?"

Konoha remained focused on the book, hands still fervently paging through it as he scanned its contents.

I sidled up to him, curious. The moment I saw the page he had open, I understood why he had suddenly grown so unusually serious.

"Hey...is that...?"

"Yeah. What a surprise."

The page contained a drawing of an enormous dragon. Next to it, there was a handwritten explanation in English. Konoha's eyes were drawn to the dragon.

"...That looks so cool."

My shoulders drooped. I was an idiot for expecting anything from him.

Though, I reasoned, there's no way we'd find something useful that easily. I knew that. I felt so dumb for giving in to excitement like that.

As I slumped my head, Kido gave me a pat on the shoulder.

“S-Shintaro...I think I found something crazy.”

What is it this time? I thought as I turned around. Kido had something resembling a sketchbook in her hand.

The word SECRET was written on the cover in bold, black lettering.

“Whoa, what's *that*...?”

“Yeah, uh, I think she's been up to some pretty off-the-chain stuff.”

Slowly, she opened to the first page.

It revealed some rather avant-garde artwork of a girl—Mari, probably—running around with a sword.

Maybe she was the hero of some fairy-tale land. Nobility, perhaps, judging by the crown on her head.

She turned the page.

This time, Mari was mounted on top of a dragon-y, lizard-y creature, one with oddly fat legs.

With some creative thought, it could be interpreted as Mari plunging her sword into the dreaded monster.

Her sword was fused with her arm for some reason, no doubt because of some wicked curse placed upon her. Despite the intense battle, the happy smile on Mari's face left a distinct impression on the viewer.

She turned the page again.

Now Mari was depicted deep in the throes of an intense, exhausting dance.

The feast held in her honor after she slayed that dragon-y thing, perhaps.

But wait. After further review, the dragon from before was dancing *with* her. One wonders what kind of keen negotiation skills she had, making amends with a dragon after so callously stabbing at it.

Kido, guffawing to herself with every page turn, was having trouble breathing at this point. The only valid conclusion to make was that this sketchbook would achieve absolutely nothing for us.

“Aaaaahhhh! Don’t look at *thaaat*!”

Mari, still watching the trees outside, finally noticed us. The moment she did, she lunged at us, face red as a cherry.

“Sor...Mari—hih...hih-hih...”

Kido, a keen fan of this epic adventure, was holding her stomach at this point, about ready to fall over.

“I-I was just scribbling and stuff! You don’t have to...Ahhhh! This is soooo embarrassing!”

Mari shouted the words, both hands to her face. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like her hair began to fan out on either side of her.

“I love how *you’re* the hero in all this stuff.”

My blurted appraisal made Kido pass out on the floor, her lungs now completely failing her.

“Aaaahhhhhhh!”

Mari screamed, again.

It was amazing, seeing someone's embarrassing past get exposed in such cruel fashion.

It couldn't have been easy for Mari. *Hopefully it'll build character, or something.*

Kido slithered up to a chair, trying to catch her breath.

But she couldn't stop flashing back to the pages she saw, erupting into spasms of glee every time, immediately followed by another scream of "Noooooooo!!" from the artist.

"So, uh, Mari, do you think there's a diary or something around here?"

We needed to return to the search. I presented Mari with an out, but she gave me a cold glare instead.

"No! No more weird stuff in here!"

"Um, no! Not *your* diary! I mean, like, your mom's diary, or something else important that she wrote. Anything like that?"

Mari's face softened as she realized she'd jumped to conclusions.

"Hmmm...Oh, I think she wrote a diary, actually..."

"Really?! Where would that be?"

Mari reflected for a moment.

"I know Mom took really good care of it, but...where was it...? On top of the shelves, maybe?"

"Top of the shelf! You hear that, Konoha?"

"Y-yeah!" Konoha replied as he took a peek above each bookshelf.

Sadly, it proved not to be found that easily. "Not there," Konoha reported sadly as he checked the final shelf.

“Oh...maybe not on top of the shelves...”

“Hey! It’s not the shelves, Konoha!”

“Okay!” he replied.

“Um...the yard...”

“Konoha! The yard!”

“Got it!” Konoha said, tearing off toward the front door.

“...Or not...”

I was starting to expect this. *Sorry, Konoha. I’ll buy you some juice later on.*

Mari was still hemming and hawing to herself, but really, if there was a diary anywhere here, one place in particular seemed suspicious to me.

“That key around your neck is for the lock on the door, right, Mari?”

“Huh? Um, yes, it is. It used to be Mommy’s, but...”

Mari picked it up. It made a little tinkling sound.

Which meant, naturally, that there were actually two of them on that chain.

One of them was clearly smaller than the other. I could only see one entrance to the place, and I doubt it was simply a spare key.

Its purpose was obvious. When I scanned across the entire room, the only thing with a keyhole I saw was the small desk placed in between the bookshelves.

“The other key’s for that desk over there, isn’t it? Maybe there’s a diary in there...”

It was unlikely. The chances were pretty slim—even if this *was* Mari we were talking about, if the diary was in that obvious a place, she wouldn't be having so much trouble remembering its location.

I doubted the diary was in the desk.

Which begged the question: Where *was* it, then?

“Huh?”

Mari, driven by my words, shifted her gaze between the keys in her hand and the desk several times. A look of shock spread across her face.

“I never noticed at all...”

“Huh...?”

What has this girl been doing for the past hundred years? Oh, right—this was the kind of girl who'd go on a feverish dance with a dragon she tried to stab to death half a second earlier.

There was much to her personality that would resist my perception of common sense. That much was clear.

I took a glance out the window, starting to wonder if she was just tricking us. There, I saw a flash of white zoom past at high speed.

That's right, I thought. *We better get him back here.* But just as I did, Mari grabbed the key and began padding over to the desk.

“...Well, I guess he can wait.”

Sorry, Konoha. I'll treat you to dinner next time. Within the limits of my budget, though.

As I made the promise in my mind, Kido finally regained her breath.

“...Whew. Sorry about that, Shintaro. I’m okay now.”

Um, I uttered in my mind, *we’re kind of almost done here*.

She was facedown on the floor earlier, breaking out in what looked like a grand mal seizure. Her recovery was quite remarkable.

She did look a bit gaunt, though.

“Yeah, you know, I was thinking that little desk was kind of suspicious. Good job there, Shintaro.”

What is she going on about? Maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me, but I didn’t think her literally ROFLing in front of us led to that revelation.

“...Well, hopefully we can gain something from this diary, at least.”

Presumably we could learn more about Mari’s history than the girl herself would know.

It’d be nice if that led also to something about these eye skills...or even the “other world.”

I, at least, had high hopes.

Anything, even something tiny, would be great. *Even if it’s just an eensy little nugget, it might be the thing that links everything together.*

An affirmative *ka-chink* echoed across the room.

“Shintaro! I found it!”

Mari held up a large, dictionary-size book, deep navy blue in color.

It seemed like a pretty thick tome by diary standards.

Padding back to her own perch, Mari dropped the diary on the desk with a loud thud.

There was something almost intimidating about this weighty tome, looking at it up close. It had a presence like some grimoire of lore from an RPG.

How long had it been used for?

If Mari was right, at least several centuries, presumably.

Suddenly, we heard the door open behind us. Turning around, I saw Konoha plodding back inside.

“S-sorry...I couldn’t find it.”

The room fell silent. If consciences made sounds when they were bruised, mine would have unleashed a deafening explosion.

“Oh, uh, about that...”

I hesitated to continue, but Konoha’s eyes were already on the diary, looming on top of the desk.

The air grew tense once more. But Konoha’s expression was one of pure relief.

“Oh, you found it. Great...”

Man, what a nice guy, I thought as pangs of regret beat against my heart. *I definitely owe him a meal now.*

“Well, there it is, but...You know, Mari, it’d probably be better if you took a look through it first before we started reading...”

It wouldn’t feel very good, pawing over the private events of a family we were unrelated to.

“No,” Mari replied. “No, it’ll be fine. I think it might help all the problems we have get better.”

All the problems we have. In other words, everything that we’ve shared together as a group. Gang. Whatever.

If you asked whether knowing the truth would make us all happy again...well, maybe it wouldn't.

But if having that knowledge opened up new pathways for us, I think everyone in the gang would want their hands on it. Want the truth.

"All right. Lemme take a look, then."

Nothing in particular was written on the heavy tome's cover. It was a pure sea of azure blue.

The other three gathered around me, ready to read on.

I waited for everyone to get in position, then opened the cover.



We, mere humans blessed with the glories of "normalcy," were lucky. We were oblivious to the facts written in this diary. Until we weren't.

It was deeper than deep itself, and sadder than sadness itself.

It told of the bizarre "life" of a creature that sat, pondered, and thought.

I still remember how it felt, turning that page.

And I doubt I will ever forget about those women, going forward.

But when I opened the cover, unaware of what was to come, I simply read out the "name" that existed on that first page.

"Azami"



REAPER RECORD III

Day 1014.

The days of endless rain showed no sign of ending. The water dripped its way through the lush, resplendent greenery around me.

The season had changed, the temperature gradually edging higher, but such foul weather for so long a time took its toll on my disposition.

Every time a drop of rain fell before my eyes, it freed the smell of the grass from the ground beneath me, transporting another scent of summer to my nostrils.

“...What is *driving* that man, anyway?”

Amid the falling rain, my house—still under construction, still looking a tad unshapely—was beginning to take full form.

There, between the mountains of materials and work tools piled up in random fashion, I once again kept my eyes on the form of a single man, smiling as he moved to and fro.

“He can see how much rain there is. Any normal man would rest. And why is he so overconfident like that? He’s human. A weakling. His wounds take days to heal.”

I muttered it to myself a short distance away from my planned residence, inside a meager shack (with bath) built to provide at least the bare minimum of protection from the wind and rain.

Opening up the door it was equipped with, sitting cross-legged on the floor, and watching him was now part of my daily schedule.

If he keeps that up, it’ll be complete before too long.

He was just some simpering kid at first, totally unaware of the ABCs of home building. Now he was moving around like a professional, and it was remarkable to see him in action.

Thanks, of course, to the assistance I provided.

He was all bluff and bluster at first, but soon he was whining at me, carrying on about “don’t you know a lot about building a house” and so on. It was just too pathetic a sight to see, so I wound up teaching him.

I was his personal tutor, in other words, which is why we made such steady progress in such short time.

Then again, he was the one who chopped up all these materials, carried them all here, and assembled them together. By human standards, he had quite a bit of mettle.

The home itself wasn’t exactly a work of art, but I was willing to cut him some slack on that front.

It struck me, though—it was almost three years since we started doing this.

To me, it was a mere instant, a passing breeze in the sky. But thanks to his clumsy brazenness, it felt like quite a long three years.

I didn’t have any intention of guarding over him, per se.

Once I realized how useful he was, I felt it would be a waste if he died before my home was built. That was all.

Besides, look at how dutifully this man was living up to what he said. If he ever did complete this project, I imagine he would fulfill his end of the bargain and disappear forever.

Then I could live here alone, passing the time in idle happiness. I was still amazed at how brilliant an idea I came up with, three years ago.

I crossed my arms and nodded, mentally patting myself on the back, when the thunder began to roll in.

Looking up, I realized that the rain was growing stronger.

It would have been just about sunset on the other side of those clouds. He would be returning before long.

As it occurred to me, Tsukihiko appeared, just as expected.

And, as expected, I felt a sense of exasperated disgust at his appearance, covered in mud from head to toe.

“Boy, I got a lot of work done today. I think we’re just about done here. What do you think? ’Cause I think it’s starting to look pretty—”

“You’re filthy. Get in the bath.”

I pointed toward the bath. “Ha-ha,” Tsukihiko said. “Right. Sorry, sorry.” Then he marched right toward it.

It may have been just a shack, but it was proving pretty useful.

It was Tsukihiko’s suggestion. “Let’s start with someplace where you can see everything happening,” he said. It was little more than a roof at first, but in a flash it kept on being expanded. Built upon. And now here we were.

When he added a space for himself in the shack, I was livid at first. “It’ll make the building go a lot faster than me coming up from the foot of the mountain,” he said. I grudgingly accepted, and now he was staying here half the time.

He wasn’t any great harm to me, and it actually did make progress on the home quicken considerably. I was still a tad uncomfortable with it, but I decided to let it be until we were done.

Yes. I just need to be patient until then.

Once he's done, I'll finally obtain a place for myself. I just need to be patient.

...Still, I might have been spoiling him, heating up the bath for him like I did.

Or not. I didn't want him falling to the ground, exhausted. That would mean no house. What a nuisance *that* would be.

The thought was scrambled in my mind by the shout of "Thanks for the bath! This feels so great!" from over in the corner.

Day 1032.

The seemingly unending rain finally went away. Summer began to make its presence known.

Avoiding the direct sunlight, I filled the tub Tsukihiko brought for me with water, splashing my feet in it.

“Hey! That bit’s about to come off!”

Tsukihiko waved back at my shout.

He was there again today, silently tackling his construction work. Today he was taking position on top of the roof.

Despite working day in, day out under the hot sun, his skin never so much as slightly browned, his lily-white countenance contrasting with the black roof and making him all the more visible.

Whether it was his genes or not, I couldn’t say. But from his bright white hair on down, being so pale at a young age made me wonder about him.

I had only told him about a piece of roofing that was curling off the top. Did he confuse that with me cheering him on or something?

All he did was wave at me with a smile, showing no sign of running to fix it.

“Helloooo? Not *that*! Look under you!”

Tsukihiko, finally realizing what I was trying to get across, stood up a little and shouted “Huh? What did you say?!”

This frustrating failure to communicate was starting to gnaw on my nerves. *Can’t that idiot understand anything the first time?*

“I said, look under...Ah!”

Just as I tried to shout it, Tsukihiko lost his balance on top of the roof.

Losing his support, Tsukihiko's body fell away, thrust into the air.

What now? What should I do at a time like this?

Maybe some kind of...No. I don't have any kind of power I could use to save him from this.

In that single moment in time, my mind was buried in thought.

Yet I failed to find any effective recourse I could use to rescue Tsukihiko from my current distance.

Helpless against the call of gravity, Tsukihiko tumbled out of sight, down the other side of the house.

It felt like my heart had frozen.

From that height, no matter how he landed, his life was in danger.

Overturning my ersatz foot bath, I ran to where I thought Tsukihiko made contact.

If he at least landed on his feet, I could do *something*...

But that last vision of Tsukihiko stamped into my mind indicated to me that he likely didn't.

“Tsukihiko!”

I turned around the corner and looked down upon the ground.

But I didn't see Tsukihiko anywhere.

Before I could comprehend what happened, I heard a sheepish voice from above my head.

“Whew! That was close. Hmm? What is it, Azami?”

Looking up, I saw Tsukihiko, hanging by one hand from the edge of the roof.

Faced with the man and his ever-present simpering smile, I felt the rage bubble up within me, ahead of any sense of relief.

“Stop screwing around, you piece of crap! Why do creatures as weak as you have to be so careless?!”

My indignation made Tsukihiko blanch. His smile didn’t budge.

“Huh?”

His reaction indicated that he didn’t understand what I was stomping my feet over.

I opened my mouth, attempting to launch more vitriol his way. But all manner of emotions began to simmer within me. I couldn’t find the words I wanted.

All I could whimper out in the end was “You fool!”—the simplest, most childish thing in the world.

With that, I turned my back to Tsukihiko.

“Fill the tub back up with water. And...don’t go back up on the roof today.”

“All—all right!” Tsukihiko said, flustered.

I hated it.

I truly hated it.

More than anything, I abhorred the fact that this incident was enough to make my blood freeze in place.

What’s more, when I returned, none of the water was left in my

tub. It exasperated me, heart and soul.

Let's just not speak with him any longer today. That ought to make him whimper a bit. It usually does.

The thought made me feel a bit better. I could feel my anger loosen slightly.

Day 1058.

“He’s late...!”

The view this evening was pleasant.

The passing breeze felt good against my skin. Combined with the western sun, it made for a pleasant time outdoors.

“He said he was picking up some food from home since he ran out, but for *this* long? He was talking about *his* home, wasn’t he?”

Despite the vivid, brilliant view in front of me, the thunder was still booming across the confines of my heart.

“I ran out of stuff to eat,” he told me, “so I’m going back to get some. I’ll be back in the afternoon.” And now it was evening.

Tsukihiko always made the round trip from here to his home in around three hours.

Even when he was late, it was always for a valid reason—rainfall, or snow on the forest paths—and no matter how late he was, he always made it back before sundown. It was *never* like this.

As I griped to no one in particular, the sky went from pink, to purple, to a dark blue.

The sun sank in an instant, as if sneering at my pathetic stood-up self. It was night, and Tsukihiko was still gone.

“What is that fool thinking? He was crowing just yesterday about how ‘Oh, I’ll have this complete in a week’ and such!”

I sat against the shack’s outer wall, grabbing my knees and ranting at myself.

I could hear the cry of some insect far, far away. But I could sense no creature anywhere near this place.

In contrast, the thumping of my heart seemed oddly loud to my ears.

He probably won't be back tonight, I imagined.

Thinking about it, that was obvious. Anyone trying to pick their way through these forest paths certainly wouldn't want to do so at night.

If he intended to leave his home in the evening, he likely thought better of it, lest it turn into night midway. The idea seemed perfectly natural to me.

Or perhaps the weather was so good that he took a nap somewhere along the way...

Hopefully not. That would be dangerous.

Well, maybe the sun got the best of him. Maybe he fell fast asleep the moment he reached home.

Amid the darkness, I lined up the reasons in my mind for why Tsukihiko wasn't back.

“Ah, he'll be back tomorrow morning.”

.....

“No. Perhaps he'll come trundling back here after all, in a little while.”

...No. It was all wishful thinking.

It was all delusions. What I wanted to have happen.

I was fumbling for natural explanations, and the most natural one

of all floated into my mind long ago.

Why was I trying to layer over it with reams of thinly disguised fantasy?

“Did he run away on me?”

Thinking about it, that was the most obvious theory.

After all, it was simply abnormal, this man working here for three years without compensation, silently hammering away at my house.

To be honest, I had no idea why he was still here. What his thought process was.

Any suspicion that he was trying to dupe me had long been extinguished. But I still had difficulty understanding what drove him, what made him tick.

...He said something to me first, didn't he? What was it?

I remember how eerie it felt when I heard it. I had paid it little heed at the time, but I thought it was...

“I was kind of thinking it'd be nice if I could get a closer look at you, but...”

The moment I recalled the phrase, I felt like someone clenched at my heart with his fist.

My cheeks grew hot, and it became difficult to breathe.

How could he say anything so shameful...!

What is he, some kind of idiot?!

Or, what, did he...?

“...Did he like me?”

I could feel my mind drift off into chaos as I spoke the words.

No, no, that's insane. He is human. A different species from myself.

But he is a man, and I...in all likelihood...am a woman.

And if a man wanted to peer so intently at a woman like that, the conclusion seemed pretty clear.

A torrent of conflict raged in my staggering mind. I let out a helpless groan.

Did he say anything else to me?

Think. He must have said something. He had to have.

What was it? I think it was something even more devastating...

“If it'll help, I'd be willing to do anything you say, starting right now.”

I shot to my feet, unable to stand it any longer. If I didn't, I felt like my heart would explode.

My breathing quickened. My head began to spin.

I'm *the fool here, am I not?*

There, right at the beginning, he clearly and explicitly stated the reason why he kept staying here with me.

I realized something that shook my very core.

He was in love with me.

“So, so everything up to now was...”

The moment I realized it, I finally understood what kept him here for three years. It was almost too shameful to bear.

“Wait, so when he did that, did it mean...? And when he did *that*, too?! Ahhh...Why is he such a *fool*?!”

No. No matter how one thought about it, *I* was the fool here.

It was such a simple, insidious reason that it breathlessly explained everything else.

Now, even if I brought a mental image of his face to mind for a moment, it felt like fire was shooting out from every orifice in my body.

After musing over past events, and being sent to new valleys of despair over each one, I finally managed to regain my composure.

I inhaled deeply several times, attempting to catch my breath.

Breathing in the chill night air, I felt like my scorched body was being cooled from the inside out.

“...Get back here *now*, you idiot.”

Somewhere along the line, being alone had begun to be a torment.

Once he returns, I had best scold him a bit.

He was so strange, my vitriol would no doubt gladden him if anything.

Day 1059.

I sobbed uncontrollably. *That* was a novel experience.

Not that it came all at once. It was more of a gradual segue, as Tsukihiko failed to return even as morning dawned.

“Come on, you don’t have to cry. I’m right here, all safe and sound, okay?”

Tsukihiko tried to comfort me as I sat, sobbing, my hands on my knees. But the tears refused to stop flowing.

I doubt anyone would have imagined him coming back covered in cuts and bruises.

The man I had been waiting for showed up like *that*, out of nowhere. That would make *anyone* cry out of shock.

“I sure am sorry I’m late, though. Things just got a little... complicated, is all.”

Tsukihiko assembled a timid smile on his face as he scratched his head.

What the hell is this man covered in wounds smiling about? What is he, stupid?

I finally staved off the tears long enough to ask.

“...Why are you so hurt?”

Tsukihiko’s expression clearly grew taut. He tried to smile again, flustered, but I could see right through him.

“What? Is it something you can’t tell me about?”

“Um, no! No, not at all. It’s just...”

He let out a light sigh, perhaps realizing he could no longer pussyfoot around the subject.

“Umm, do you remember the first time we met? You know, when you were sitting there, deep in thought, and I spoke up...Hey, what’s wrong?”

I buried my face in my knees, denying it the chance to expose its current shade of crimson to the world.

I had only recalled it yesterday. How could I forget about it?

“Go on,” I said, head still firmly against my knees.

“Um, okay. So, back then, I was actually on my way home from fighting in a war. They told me I wasn’t useful for anything.”

He *was* wearing something resembling a soldier’s uniform, come to think of it.

But useless for anything? That’s an awfully mean thing to say to someone...Though I had said far worse to him by this point.

“So I was wandering around, essentially, and I came across you. I thought you were, you know, kind of pretty. So that’s how I wound up here, but...”

“Stop *saying* things like that about me.”

I tried to hold everything back as I spoke, but to be honest, the shame felt like it was about to snuff my life out.

Nothing like this bothered me before. Now this emotion was driving me to new depths of despair.

“Ah-ha-ha! Sorry about that. So when you said to build a house for you, at first I was all ‘What are you, crazy?’ But more than that, I was just kind of...happy. It felt nice that someone like me could be of

aid to someone as pretty as you.”

“Ngh, ah, thank you.”

“What?! Boy, you’re acting pretty strange today.”

Could this guy *be* any more simpleminded?

He had to be pulling my chain by now.

But by this point, that aspect of him seemed to make him all the more lovable.

...Am I beautiful?

...Really?

...It feels so good.

“So, anyway, my mother and father passed away when I was young and left me a decent amount of land, so I never had any problem staying afloat, but yesterday I ran into one of the villagers for the first time in a while, and...”

Tsukihiko grinned a bashful grin.

“And what? You’re a villager, too, are you not?”

“I am, but...well, you understand, I look a little off-the-beaten-path compared to other people. So they never treated me all that well.”

The moment Tsukihiko said it, the wistfulness clear in his voice, I immediately understood everything. A clear twinge of hostility materialized in my mind.

“...Just because of that?”

“Huh?”

“They did all of this to you, just because of that?”

A large bruise was manifesting itself clearly upon Tsukihiko's face, his clothing wet and muddy.

The villagers must have done all of that to him.

I had barely the slightest interest in conflict between humankind, but Tsukihiko's involvement was all it took for an intense resentment to take form inside of me.

Until I could treat these villagers to what they did to Tsukihiko—no, unless they had an even worse experience—I couldn't see myself as even with them.

I stood up. Tsukihiko, picking up on my intention, stood before me, arms open.

“Don't.”

“Don't? Why shouldn't I? Look at the pain you went through! The villagers shouldn't have any complaints going through what *you* did.”

“No, it's fine. I'm back here today now, so...”

The smile was still on his face.

I was seething with the desire for revenge, but with Tsukihiko himself stopping me, I was gripped by the odd feeling that something was wrong about my behavior. It made my chest hurt.

“...Why not? Doesn't that make you angry?”

“Hmm? Oh, no...I mean, I don't think they're in the right here at all. That's why I don't want *you* doing the same thing *they* do.”

I had nothing to respond with.

...It was true. I didn't want anyone to think I was the same as them.

But, reflecting on the fact that Tsukihiko would have to live in that

wretched place for years and decades to come, I felt heartrendingly helpless.

...Is he really fine with this?

Surrounded by his hate-filled neighbors, treated as an idiot and a fool down to the core, exposed to violence on a passing whim?

“Never go back to the village.”

The words naturally flowed out of my mouth.

That's right. He never has to go back. He can just stay here, forever.

Then he wouldn't have to face this constant tragedy.

But I received no response to my suggestion.

Looking up, I saw Tsukihiko standing solemnly, fists clenched.

It made me remember the promise I made him accept.

When I told him to build a home for me, I commanded him to do something else as well: Leave once he was done.

Our entire relationship had a built-in time limit. The moment the house was complete.

I knew that. So why was I saying this?

Tsukihiko must be making that face for the same reason. I knew he was the sort of man who dutifully kept a promise. He proved that, over and over, for the past three years.

“...Sorry. Forget about it.”

The moment I said it, the tears came back.

It felt lonely.

So lonely. I was lost for a solution. I didn't want him away from me.

Oh, why did I have to say that back then? I am such a fool. A stupid, useless fool.

“...I'm sorry.”

The word squeezed itself out from Tsukihiko.

I knew it. There was nothing strange about it. The most obvious thing in the world.

...But still, the part of me that was expecting something else felt horribly ashamed, beyond all hope.

Well, I'd best make him wrap up work on the house soon.

Once he's out of my life, I'll be all alone and...

“Will you be my wife?”

“...Yes.”

I was embraced by him.

It was the first time I felt the warmth of Tsukihiko—of a human.

The troubles in my mind disappeared without a trace, as if quelled by some supreme answer.

Tears are something you shed when you're sad. When you're in pain.

Not at times like this.

"I'm sorry. I guess I broke my promise."

The same old, dutiful, guileless Tsukihiko. "You fool," I said, berating him as I always had.



Day 1072.

The dead of summer.

The clear sky seemed to drain me of any desire to move.

It was a pure, transparent shade of blue, the flowing breeze keeping the clouds from forming.

“It took you long enough. I was about to die of boredom.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Tsukihiko said, bowing his head to me.

My home, finally complete, was a tad ungainly but still satisfying enough to me.

It wouldn't crumble to pieces that easily, I presumed.

After all, it was built under my own personal direction. If this house fell apart, it was absolutely, completely Tsukihiko's fault.

“I could complain about this and that, but...Well, at least it's here. I have to compliment you for that.”

“Ha-ha-ha! Well, thank you. I don't know, though, this feels... amazing. Profound, if you will. If you put your mind to it, you really *can* make anything.”

Tsukihiko looked over the home's exterior walls, face flush with emotion.

His magnum opus, completed after three years. I'm sure it's more than enough to make *that* simpleton beam with joy.

Speaking of “magnum,” however, something did bother me slightly.

“...Say, Tsukihiko?”

“Hmm? What is it?”

Tsukihiko smiled contentedly at me.

“This house is quite a bit larger than what I originally asked for, isn’t it?”

He twitched a little, face blanching even as the smile remained.

“Well, um...I’m—I’m sorry. I was just...anticipating things, so I made a few adjustments...”

He couldn’t have sounded more awkward.

That bastard. He never had any intention of leaving at all, did he?

It pained me, realizing that I was all but doing his bidding the whole time, but it also made me feel a touch ashamed.

“...I wasn’t complaining about it.”

Tsukihiko’s face brightened considerably.

“Oh! Well, great! Whew...I thought you’d ask me to build another house for a moment there.”

“Wh-who do you think I am?! ...Well, forget about it. Let’s go inside.”

I left Tsukihiko behind as I headed for the front door. Before I reached it, I noticed something under the outer wall, a single flower blooming amid the freshly cut grass.

I approached it, wondering why it was blooming all to itself here. “Oh, that?” Tsukihiko explained. “I thought it looked kind of cute, so I kept it there.”

It took a certain type of male brain to describe a flower as “cute.” I

wished he acted a bit more macho sometimes...but then, that's *him*, in full bloom itself. It was complicated.

Just a single flower, deep pink in color, blooming proud and strong.

“...What's this flower called?”

I knelt down for a closer look. Tsukihiko crouched next to me.

“You don't know? Wow. You sure don't get stumped all that often.”

“D-don't be stupid! I just can't recall it presently...Just tell me! Stop hiding things from me!”

Tsukihiko giggled at my urgent command and gave the flower a light tap.

“Well, it’s called an *azami*. A thistle.”

CHILDREN RECORD V

“Why did you have to *say* that?!”

Mari screamed at us, protesting furiously.

Her hair began to undulate on both sides of her head, as if symbolizing her emotions.

Her pink-colored eyes began to pulsate, turning a deep shade of red in time with her ragged breathing.

“Wh-whoa, Mari. Shintaro didn’t mean anything bad by it. He’s just making a guess. A what-if kind of thing. It’s nothing to get that angry about...”

Kido’s explanation was about half-right. Which meant it was half-wrong, too.

There was no what-if in my mind when I said it.

I was convinced it was God’s own truth.

“Nnnnhhh...!”

Mari groaned at Kido, wanting to say something but failing as the tears began to fall.

The exhibition clearly unnerved Konoha. He exchanged glances with Mari and me.

“I...I-I’m going outside...!”

“Hey! Mari...!”

Mari shot up to her feet, ignoring Kido’s plea as she flew out the

door.

“I-I’ll chase her down!”

Konoha followed right behind her. With his speed, it likely wouldn’t be much of an ordeal for him.

Thus, Kido and I were left alone inside the room. Kido huffed out a frustrated sigh and sank into her chair.

“So...what do you think, Kido?”

Kido distractedly scratched the back of her head.

“I completely agree with you.”

“Feels like I did something bad to Mari just now, though. I guess in her mind, I pretty much said that her grandmother’s the cause of all this trouble.”

“Yeah, well, the truth hurts. She’ll be fine. We can just explain things to her in a way she’d understand.”

I settled into the chair Mari had been seated in, allowing me to face Kido directly.

I thought I had my theory pretty well settled inside my mind. To be honest, though, there was still far too much I couldn’t quite swallow about it all.

“Well, at least we know what Mari is now, pretty much.”

“Yeah. All written there in black-and-white, too. One way or the other, she’s gonna have to come to terms with it.”

Kido thumbed through the open diary as she spoke.

“A ‘monster,’ huh...? No matter the era, people never change, huh?”

There was something melancholy to her voice.

Everyone in the gang was probably familiar with being treated in the same way that the journal depicted.

They had all inherited the same factors influencing their lives, at least. It couldn't have been pleasant, encountering the truth out there.

“So I guess the main cause is this ‘clearing eyes’ ability, huh?”

“Yeah. That’s got to be the one...although I don’t know if you’d really call it an ability.”

Kido’s take made sense. Out of the ten abilities that appeared in the diary, the ‘clearing’ one in particular was in a league of its own.

“Who knows...? It’s not like she was *using* it, exactly, I guess...”

As far as we could tell from the book, the woman herself didn’t recognize it as an “ability.”

But if these abilities came together to form...*that* world, and “clearing” is counted as one of them, that’s probably the best way to think about it.

“So, right now, not counting Mari, there are five people we know of carrying these ‘abilities.’”

“Yeah. Don’t really know which one Hibiya picked up yet, though. You think Konoha’s one of them, too, don’t you?”

“No doubt in my mind, yeah. Normal people don’t go jumping hundreds of feet in the air like that.”

Nothing like Konoha’s abilities showed up in the diary.

Which meant that it was one of the two skills touched upon but never fully explained inside: “stirring eyes” or “awakening eyes.”

“Okay. So, six, counting Konoha. And we don’t know where the

other four carriers are yet...”

“If we can track down whoever has the ‘clearing’ skill, we might be able to get some more info on *that* world.”

“Yeah. Assuming the skill’s made it to this world, that is. If not, we’re pretty well screwed.”

In the end, the diary was a vast trove of information.

The “abilities,” and the other world we knew nothing about, were now firmly linked with each other. This would serve as a new guidepost for us, leading ever closer to the truth.

We were at the point where the final answers were tantalizingly near.

If things keep going this well, we might be able to storm *that* world and get back everyone who disappeared inside.

“*That* world, huh...?”

“*That* world.”

Kido and I fell silent. I imagined we were thinking the same thing.

“...We should probably come up with a name for it, huh? ‘*That* world’ is kind of getting old.”

“Funny. I was just thinking that, too.”

Not that I was ever much good at naming things. *There’s no need to come up with anything too contrived. Just something easy to remember and—*

“How about ‘Kagerou Daze’?”

I could see the sparkle in Kido’s eyes.

Great, she must be really proud of that one, I thought dryly.

As expected, Kido's expression took on an "Oh, no, what have I done" nuance as she gauged my reaction.

"The *kagerou* refers to the haze you see on hot days. You know? Appearing as a shimmer, then disappearing right away. And the 'daze' describes how it puts you in a daze and stuff, so..."

Oh, and she has a whole explanation for it, too. Woo. It was like taking a bad joke and running it into the ground, and it irritated me. I wish she'd stop.

"Uh, sure. Great. That's just fine..."

"No, wait, listen to me. The 'daze' part has another meaning, too..."

Somebody get me out of here.

Didn't we just close this topic? How much meaning did she *put* in there?

I just told her that I didn't give two craps about that.

"O-okay! Perfect! I think we're pretty much done here, right? We should probably head home. It's gonna be rough if we gotta hike in the dark."

"Hm? Oh. Yeah, true. I'll tell you the rest of the meaning once we're back in the hideout."

Cut me a break already. It's not even that amazing a name anyway.

She'll probably forget all about it by the time we reach the hideout.

Having to listen to this topic on end for so long was physically painful to me. *Let's just head for the hideout and have her talk Momo's ear off about it instead.*

I stood up and headed for the door.

Opening it, I felt my body's temperature noticeably rise when exposed to the direct sunlight.

The thought of having to hike back across that trail was enough in itself to weigh me down with fatigue.

Maybe I could have Konoha carry me on his back...? Oh, nope. Can't. He had the backpack.

In his arms, then...? Oh, right. He was carrying Mari that way. Nothing doing, either way.

Kido followed me out the door, shutting it behind her.

"So, where's Mari?"

Mari said she was going outside, but she couldn't have gone very far...

Kido and I gave the area around us a quick scan. Behind some of the brush facing the rear of the house, we caught a glimpse of a white, fluffy silhouette.

"There she is. Hello? Mari? I'm sorry about before, okay? Go ahead and come on back!"

Mari shouted something or other in response to me. It was too far away to make out.

"What'd she say...?"

Faced with no other choice, I proceeded through the brush, to a point where I could now clearly see her.

She was still screaming something. But what, though? I couldn't figure it out.

I ventured on, up to a point where the brush in front of me

abruptly ended.

I stopped, agape.

As I did, a miserable, sobbing plea for help rang sharply in my ears.

I edged a little closer, carefully, only to find that the fifteen feet or so from the place where the brush stopped to where Mari was standing was empty space, a deep ravine running below it.

“M-Mari?! Why’re you over there?!”

Scanning the area for any possible explanation, I spotted a log spanning the ravine a short way away, functioning as a crude bridge.

“I-I wub chesed buh a bee...,” Mari replied, still loudly sobbing.

I assumed she meant “I was chased by a bee,” which implied that, in her mad dash to escape this attacker, she shimmied her way across the log and to the other side.

“But what made you...?”

“Mari?!” exclaimed Kido, running in from behind me.

“What do you think we should do?”

“What do I think? I think we gotta help her, is what I think. Hey, where did Konoha go?”

Yeah, *he* wouldn’t have any problem crossing this span.

He could just hop on over, pick Mari up, and hop right on back. It probably wouldn’t even make him break a sweat.

“Oh, yeah, he went off at the same time she did, didn’t he...?”

“Is he lost?”

Kido and I drooped our shoulders.

If he wasn't here, that was likely the cause. Where did he run off to, anyway?

Without him around, though, we were getting nowhere fast.

Judging by her current emotional state, it'd probably be too much to ask Mari to make her way across the log again.

But the idea of me going across and bringing her back was even more implausible. The reason was simple: I didn't have anywhere near the guts to attempt a crossing.

"Well, I guess we just have to wait..."

Before I could finish the thought, something small and yellow entered my field of vision.

It was proceeding toward my head at high speed, wings buzzing incessantly.

A bee.

"Gaaahhhh!!"

My body twitched in horror at this sudden turn of events.

I needed to get out of there as soon as possible. As soon as possible...

I planted a foot down to start running...and hit air instead.

Whoops. Messed that up.

Kido, surprised, entered my vision, only to shrink rapidly.

My body, pulled by an irresistible force, plunged down toward the bottom of the ravine.

...Well, this is it. No saving me now.

Seeing the now-tiny Kido far away, I realized this was the end.

This was probably going to hurt something terrible. As it should, though. I knew how high up I was.

And that reminded me: I had pretty much the same thought the moment Ayano died. I was on the roof then, just watching, but... hmm. So *this* was how it felt.

“Must’ve been scary for her...”

Right after I whispered it and closed my eyes, I felt a dull impact across my body and lost consciousness.



The moment my eyes opened, I found a shivering Konoha, copious amounts of blood pouring out of his stomach.

I realized, instinctively, that he must have saved me.

Nothing physically hurt on my body, but the sight before me made my heart feel like it was being crushed.

Next to Konoha, there was a tree branch, about the diameter of your arm, sticking up from the ground.

It was dead, barren, the edge honed and dripping with blood.

It must have stabbed right through him.

I heard some shouting from the edge of the cliff above, but instead of listening to it, my mind was preoccupied with finding a way to rescue the man in front of me.

I was out of cell-phone range.

If we carried him, we’d never make it to help in time.

What else can we do?

First aid? No. This wasn’t something you could just bandage up and

forget.

Something. There has to be something. Some way to save him...

“Why’d you have to save someone like *me*...?”

That was all I could say to Konoha, even as his shivering grew less violent.

He weakly whispered something in response.

He was coughing blood at the same time, so most of what he said was snuffed out by a bubbling whimper, but there was no doubting my ears. He said “because we’re friends.”

My body shook as tears began to well in my eyes.

Did I even do anything for him?

No. I couldn’t do anything.

And yet he broke my fall, and now he can’t move anymore.

The light was already gone from Konoha’s eyes, but the blood still diligently pumped its way out to the ground, spreading outward.

...Please, you gotta do something for Konoha. You’re supposed to be in his body.

We’re friends. I want to help him. Please. Please...

The moment I made that silent prayer, I felt like the air froze over for an instant.

Like I was being watched by some kind of terrifying creature.

I had little time to dwell on the sensation though, because a teeming tangle of black snakes slithered out of Konoha’s motionless body, gradually entwining themselves around him.

Konoha's previously lifeless eyes began to glow a deep shade of red. Even from my distance, I could hear the sharp beating of his heart echo around me.

All I could do was stare on, powerless, as my friend began to reconstruct himself.



REAPER RECORD IV

The flickering light of the candle just barely illuminated the top of the desk by the window.

I put my pen down on it, the first entry in my journal complete, and checked over my writing one more time.

“Hmm...Hope this is good enough.”

I knew what a journal was, of course, but actually attempting to write one proved a trying task.

I had our little trip outside to report on today, which made things a tad easier, but what on earth was I going to come up with from tomorrow onward?

Even after giving it a second reading, though, it was hard to call what I wrote about today's events “interesting” at all.

“I wanted to start this with a bang, kind of...but this really isn't much of anything, is it?”

I grew exasperated at my lack of storytelling ability.

“You don't think? I think it's wonderful.”

“Agh!” I replied, startled by the voice behind me.

“Ah-ha-ha,” Tsukihiko said, his smile still the same as always as he scratched his head. “Sorry.”

“Wha...?! Who said you could peek? You fool!”

How could I let him see me? I had let my guard down. I didn't write anything I regretted though, did I...? No...I should be fine on

that point.

“Aw, I’m just happy I showed up in the first entry, is all.”

Tsukihiko acted abashed as he spoke, but I had no idea what delighted him so much about seeing the day’s wild bee chase rendered in words.

“Pfft. I don’t have much of a cast to work with. I have no choice.”

A journal didn’t need a “cast,” precisely. But the idea of me making him happy irked me, so I ignored that detail.

“Is Shion asleep already?”

“Mm-hmm. We had a busy day outside. She’s out like a light.”

Shion’s grown into a healthy girl. She really has.

I never imagined I’d be in the position of raising a child. But it was surprising, how everything seemed to work out with it in the end.

Her birth came with a mountain of anxieties—she was the offspring of me and *this* fool, after all—but now, even with that, every day was happy for me.

“Do...do you think Shion will keep doing well? As she ages?”

Tsukihiko caressed my head, the way he always did. “Of course,” he said. “She’ll grow up to be a beautiful woman. Just like you, Azami.”

I didn’t ask him to go *that* far. I constantly told him to knock that off, that it’s embarrassing to me, but there was just no fixing that aspect of him.

“Mmm...I’m getting sleepy, too. I should probably go to bed.”

Tsukihiko punctuated the statement with a heavy yawn.

Compared to the day I first met him, his face was more wizened,

clearly older.

That's the human race for you. They age.

And yet he still ran around like a child with Shion today. Little wonder he was tired.

“Oh? Well, sleep well.”

Tsukihiko looked a tad crestfallen for a moment. Then he spoke again.

“Azami, why don't we sleep together once in a while? Shion's here and everything, too. What do you think?”

It pained my heart slightly. I didn't let it show, my face cold and steadfast.

“...Fool. I never sleep. Do you want me to just lie there all night next to you, staring at the ceiling?”

“Ah-ha-ha. No, I guess not. Sorry, sorry.”

Tsukihiko laughed it off, but his face still betrayed his lonesomeness.

“It's fine. We'll be together tomorrow.”

“True,” he said with a smile. “See you tomorrow, then.” Then he caressed my hair again.

I gave him a light wave as he disappeared into the bedroom.

Just as he left my sight, the loneliness I kept cooped up in my heart burst out of me.

Did he say that because of something I inadvertently wrote in the journal?

I knew how his mind worked. He wasn't the kind of person to be

bothered by small things like that. But: “How many more summers will the three of us see together?”

I knew I wrote that sentence in my journal, but now it seemed so needlessly cruel to me.

Tsukihiko was oblivious to it still—because I hid it—but recently, that thought had a tendency to consume me during the nights.

I tended to forget about it when I was with him, but I knew that the flow of time would never bend its rules for my sake.

...I wasn't sure he and I would be together for very much longer.

He was approaching the end of his life span. He was going to die before me.

But that was something I knew, theoretically, from the start.

Why, at this point in time, am I letting the thought trouble me so?

Because being without him filled me with a desolate sense of loneliness.

Just thinking about it made me lonely, to the point where my eyes welled up.

But that still wasn't enough to make me wish I had never met him in the first place. Anything but that.

We ran into each other, Shion was born, and then we were three.

The time we spent together was invaluable, irreplaceable to me.

So I didn't mind. As long as I enjoyed the days to come, even more than ever before, it would all work out.

Spending that valuable time tormenting myself like this would be a terrible waste.

When the time comes that we're parted, I can cry then. With all my heart.

I'd give him all the abuse I could muster: "Why did you die first?" I'll say. "You said you'd be with me forever!"

That would probably unnerve him. He was always so pathetically weak against my self-centered griping.

Did he think he could scratch his head and apologize for *that*? I'd like to see him try.

As I pondered over this, I suddenly realized that my tears were dripping down into the pages of my journal.

My breathing was tight. I tried holding it back, but the loneliness seemed to stream out of every pore.

I resolved to do away with the tears not a moment ago. *Am I really this much of a fool?*

...I can't stand it. I don't want him to go. I want to be together forever.

My head was buried in the thought. I began to stare into space.

Maybe I had cried too much. It was an odd feeling, somehow.

I wasn't trying to consciously think about anything. Yet I was gripped by the natural desire to close my eyes.

What is going on with me?

I didn't understand. But the feeling wasn't disagreeable to me.

It felt like the loneliness was fading away...

...little...

...by little...



* * * *

Welcome.

* * * *

* * * *

Welcome, my master.

Ah, you've finally allowed yourself to let your body go where it does?

You're looking rather haggard, I should say. You must have been pondering over some rather difficult thoughts.

My, but I cannot even begin to explain how long I've been waiting for this moment.

I've been waiting here, for I couldn't even guess how long, and yet you never seemed to notice me, master.

But if you're here now...does that mean you have a wish you want to make true? No matter what it takes?

Oh, no, no. It is fine. You don't have to explain everything.

What are you talking about? You are me, and I am you. There are certainly no misunderstandings between us.

Yes. Yes, I am aware.

Mm. I see, I see.

...Well! A strange and funny thing indeed, that!

Oh. No, no. Forget I ever said it.

But if that is what troubles you at the moment, master, you must have changed quite a significant amount over the years.

But no matter what your wish is, master, I am here to make it

happen. You can be quite assured on that point.

So. You say you want to be with that human for the rest of time, but if you will allow me to cut to the chase, that is simply not possible in this world.

Oh, dear. There is no need to be so pessimistic.

Remember, I said “this world.”

Yes, exactly.

Which, I suppose, begs the question: Which world do I mean?

I will be happy to explain. That is why I traveled here, after all.

Yes. Those abilities of yours. You need to use them.

Depending on how you use them, those abilities can allow you to accomplish...well, almost anything.

As I stated earlier, there is simply no way to make your wish come true in this world.

Unfortunately, I am unable to relate the reason for this to you. Please understand. I do not make the rules.

But all you have to do, then, is create a new world!

For example, how about a world where time repeats itself endlessly?

You could live there forever with the human you love, and your daughter.

With your powers, it could be accomplished in a snap.

Oh, of course, yes! These are your abilities, after all. No one else's. The power is right there, at your fingertips.

.....

...Ah, but I see our time is rapidly coming to a close.

I will explain in further detail the next time you are here.

Until then, I will remain here, waiting for you.

Certainly. Go ahead.

** * * **

* * * *

In that case, see you in your next warm dream.

* * * *

CHILDREN RECORD VI

The heat of the day finally loosened up, making it much easier to remain outside.

The sky was already a shade of deep purple, the streetlights only beginning to pop into life.

“Are you...serious...?”

I doubted my eyes for a moment, but there was no point checking and rechecking. Reality, in its purest form, spread before me.

We were in front of a vending machine nearby our hideout.

Occasionally you’d see machines that give you a second can of soda if you matched three symbols on the slot machine–type LCD display. I thought those were BS my whole life—I assumed it was just for show, having never heard of anyone actually winning a free drink—but the chintzy electronic display on the top of the machine clearly flashed **WINNER!** in bold lettering.

“So it *wasn’t* an urban legend...!”

I thrust my hand into the bottom compartment. My fingers detected the clear presence of two wet, cold-to-the-touch plastic bottles.

Taking them out, I was greeted with the warm, inviting sight of two sodas.

An intoxicating elixir of joy circulated from my palm to the rest of my body.

How wonderful it would’ve been to drain their contents right there,

on the spot. Instead, I forced myself to retain a modicum of patience.

“Saves me from having to buy two, I guess.”

I handed a bottle over to Konoha. “Uh, thanks,” he said, no trace of emotion present in his acknowledgment.

We stood side by side in front of the machine, both greedily guzzling our respective drinks.

The pleasant sensation of sugar pulsed down my throat, steamrolling through my esophagus and providing its sweet delights to every other organ on the way to my stomach.

Ahh...Yes. That's the stuff.

This fabled land, this paradise, known only to those who experienced a summer death-march hike like mine.

I was at its peak now, having a heart-to-heart conversation with the soda.

It was a feast for every bodily sense, growing deeper, sultrier, more intense as it continued.

This was what it was. Soda, a passport to the heavens, provided by God in equal measures for all of His creations.

“Praise be to soda...”

“Wh-what?”

Oops.

I was soda-ing it up so much that I left Konoha to himself.

But, realizing that the soda in Konoha’s hand was no longer full either, I experienced a joyous sense of glee.

“Good, huh?”

Konoha briskly nodded twice.

Before long the sky settled into the color of cola.

It was a long day, as summer days generally are, and it was finally over.

“Funny how time flies when you aren’t paying attention, huh?”

Konoha was blithely staring at the sky as well.

He was hiding it with his bottle, but there was a gaping hole in his clothing.

I finished off my soda and tossed the container into the recycle bin next to the vending machine.

“Hey, Konoha.”

“Yes?”

He turned to face me, expressionless.

I was starting to understand now. This was just how he was.

He never showed it on his face, but there was nothing expressionless about his heart.

I thought he was some kind of freak at first. But I was wrong. *He’s pretty much just a nice guy, is all.*

“You said you were my friend earlier, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” Konoha replied curtly.

“So, listen, don’t make yourself shoulder all the pain, okay? ‘Cause I felt terrible down there.”

This guy just saved my life.

I knew I was in no position to harp on him about that. But no way did I want to feel that way again.

“Yeah,” he said again. I couldn’t tell if he understood or not.

Yet I felt like this second “yeah” somehow had more feeling behind it than the first “yeah.” The thought made me a bit happier.

“...We better get back. The boss is probably gonna kill us.”

“Yeah.”

After a short walk, we were face-to-face with the creepy-looking building with the 107 plate on it.

Stepping inside, we were greeted by Kido and Mari, chirping “Hello!” in unison.

I was practically dead on my feet.

I sat on the sofa and groggily stared at the ceiling.

As I stared into space, Mari began mending Konoha’s clothing. “Kagerou Daze...,” Kido said to herself, still proud of the term.

Suddenly, I heard the front door open, followed by a familiar set of loud, tromping footsteps.

I drummed up my last remaining bit of strength to greet the voice I knew too well.

“Yeah...Welcome back...”

HEADPHONE ACTOR V

In front of a banner ad for an eBook site, I whispered to no one in particular: "...I've been through here before, haven't I?"

I leaned against the banner and heaved a sigh.

"I can't believe I forgot how to get back home...I'm such an idiot sometimes."

In this world of continually tangled data, a single eye blink would make everything seem startlingly different.

The gardening page I traveled through yesterday was now occupied by a rather sinister-looking, members-only cosplay site.

A band site, once filled with the soulful lyrics of some would-be musician or another, was now devoted to ranking the best ramen joints in Tokyo.

This kind of thing happened every day. I was familiar with it by now, or so I thought. But if we're talking a gap of two years, that's a different story.

"Hmmm...I better come up with an idea or something..."

I tried flapping my arms around, but there were sadly no good ideas hiding in the nether regions of my sleeves.

Somewhere along the line, I had fully transformed into Ene.

The dull sense of exhaustion that made me sleep half my life away was gone now. I was Ene, my master's personal girl-power life coach, running on all cylinders twenty-four hours a day...

"I guess that story was true all along, though. But, ooh, I gotta

make that faker *pay!*”

I began flailing around in frustration.

Soon, I was floating on my back, listlessly looking at my surroundings. The boundless world around me was filled, as always, with the electronic desires of all the world’s population.

“Though I guess this whole world’s a fake in the end, isn’t it?”

I rolled to the side and steeled myself. I needed to find my way back home.

Extending an index finger, I began typing a URL into the air in front of me.

“Can’t win the lotto if you don’t buy a ticket, I guess. I think it was something like this...Here we go!”

Once I typed it out, I was greeted by a familiar-looking window.

“Yes! Bingoooooooo!”

I flashed *V* for Victory to myself and dove into the window, eventually reaching a small, square space.

“Whew! I haven’t been here in ages! Not that it was all that great an experience...”

I had sobbed hysterically in here.

I wouldn’t call that “great” at all, no.

One side of the space contained a list of options, INBOX and SENT MAIL among them.

I selected FAVORITES and opened the top mail on the list.

“Sorry I’m so late on this.”

As I spoke, I tapped the REPLY button. The one thing I couldn't do two years ago.

Subject: Sorry I'm late

Sorry I'm so late in getting this reply back to you.

I had trouble believing you and I didn't really know what to do, so I kept dodging the issue instead. I apologize for that.

But you were right all along.

Everyone's starting to get back together, and I guess I wound up shacking up with them, too.

It might be too late to wish this, but I'm going to try to do whatever I can from here.

He wound up getting wrapped up in it all, too.

I was pretty amazed that Momo was also one of them, but...

I think everything's turning out okay with him, though.

He made the choice himself, and now he's moving on. I always knew he had some man in him.

You're over there, aren't you, Ayano? I'm sorry. I promise we're going to save you.

Anyway, I'm off.

Once we beat "awakening," we have just *got* to meet up. Okay?

Takane Enomoto

AFTERWORD

A Sight for Sore Eyes

Hello. JIN here.

Thanks, as always, for all of your support.

What did you think of Volume 4, then?

This volume mainly focuses around the character of Azami.

I felt this way about Hibiya a lot when writing Volume 3, but I guess I have a habit of falling in love with the main characters I focus on.

By now, with Volume 4 in the “done” pile, I’ve become a huge Azami fan.

I could just hear her say “You fool! ♡” in response.

Huh? Shintaro? Oh, yeah, I guess he was around, too, wasn’t he?

So! Once again we find ourselves (what a smooth change of subject) right in the dead of summer with this book.

It was spring in the 3-D world when I wrote Volume 3, but smack-dab in the middle of summer with this one, which made things seem to drag on even longer than usual.

Forget about me getting a summer vacation *this* year.

No beachside antics. No ghost stories by the campfire.

All I had was the giant game of chicken I like to call a “deadline.”

Though I have to say, it's doing wonders for my pace.

We've only just released Volume 3, but *boom*, here's the next one. What's with that? Are they trying to torment me on purpose?

Not that whining about it will change anything, I suppose.

Even if I burst out of my home, screaming for help, I'm soon on the run from my editor, a giant, sharp pair of scissors in his hands.

I could try boarding a taxi, but it's happened at least once that the taxi driver turned out to be another editor. All these editors, lurking where you least expect them. It's like some psychological horror film.

My room, as usual, is a total mess. It's about 40 percent furniture and 60 percent garbage, and it's not going to improve anytime soon.

Now would be a pretty good time for a big-breasted French maid of some sort to show up. Like, *really*. Right now. Before I get angry.

As I write this, though, I'm increasingly faced with the depressing realization that, um, I wrote this kind of stuff in the last afterword, too, didn't I?

I'm out of things to write about. Please send help.

If you don't leave your home, you'll never encounter anything new. That's my situation. What could be fun about talking to a twenty-two-year-old like that?

But, still, write I must.

There are people at my autograph signings who actually claim they look forward to my afterwords! Well, here you go! I'm writing one! (Please try to enjoy the other 99 percent of the book, too, though.) Oh, speaking of which, one of my (female) cousins started reading my novels.

She likes Kano, apparently.

Kano, huh? Man, he's good with the ladies, isn't he?

Well, well, well. Guess I know who I'm gonna make throw up in the next volume (he said, grinning).

Personally speaking, my favorite male character is Haruka.

He's just a nice guy, you know? Probably smells good, too.

Still, here we are. Volume 4.

I know I complain all the time, but I'm having a constant blast writing these.

I sincerely think to myself "Man, I wish these guys could be *my* friends" as I write.

I'd just love to dive into the world of the novels and hang out for a while.

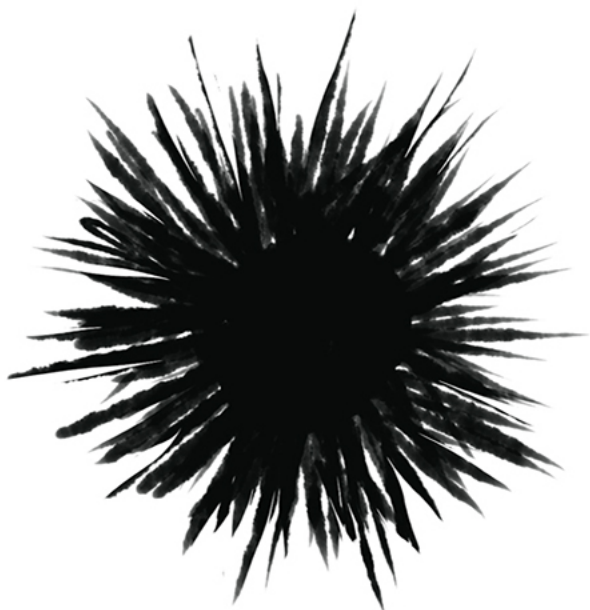
Maybe I'll insert myself into the next volume, proclaiming "I am Kagerou Daze!" or some such nonsense.

Oop. I see my editor's snipping his scissors at me and saying "You fool! ♡." Probably not happening, then. Pity.

And so I'll wrap things up here, I think, as I pray for Volume 5's release date to come as soon as possible.

See you all again in the next afterword!

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)



Sea urchin

SIDU

Congrats on releasing Volume 4!!



I was really, really looking forward to this one!! The story's really heating up now, isn't it? I gotta hand it to SIN and SIDU; they put a ton of work into this! Every time, they go beyond all my expectations with the wonderful stuff they release to the world... I just have to bow my head to them. Keep up the good work!

MAHIRO SATOU

The Kagerou Daze
manga is
running now!

Congratulations on releasing
Kagerou Daze, Volume 4!!

We're finally at Volume 4,
it seems. Thinking about all
the years I've spent chatting
with JIN about the
stuff we're working
on is starting
to fill me
with a sense
of nostalgia.
I know we'll keep
talking, and I also
know JIN's only
getting started,
so to speak. Let's
hang out if
anything comes up!

From Ishiburo



HERE'S ANOTHER SHOT AT
DRAWING SETO, WHO WAS
FACED WITH ALL KINDS OF
HARDSHIP IN THE DOWNER
COMIC ANTHOLOGY.

"KIMONO" APPEARED IN THIS
TWITTER QUIZ I TOOK, SO...

CONGRATS ON NOVEL VOLUME 4!

AMAZING JOB, YOU GUYS! THIS IS RYUUSEI, THE
GUY WHO SHOWED UP MYSTERIOUSLY IN VOLUMES
1 AND 2. APART FROM THE FACT THAT WE'RE
ROOMMATES, THERE AREN'T REALLY A TON OF
REASONS WHY I KEEP SHOWING UP IN THESE,
BUT ALL THE SAME, I'M HAPPY
HE CALLED UPON ME!
RYUUSEI

COME ON
AND VISIT
US AGAIN,
SIDU!

I'M JUST A MILD-
MANNERED ILLUSTRATOR.
TWITTER: @RYUUSEEE

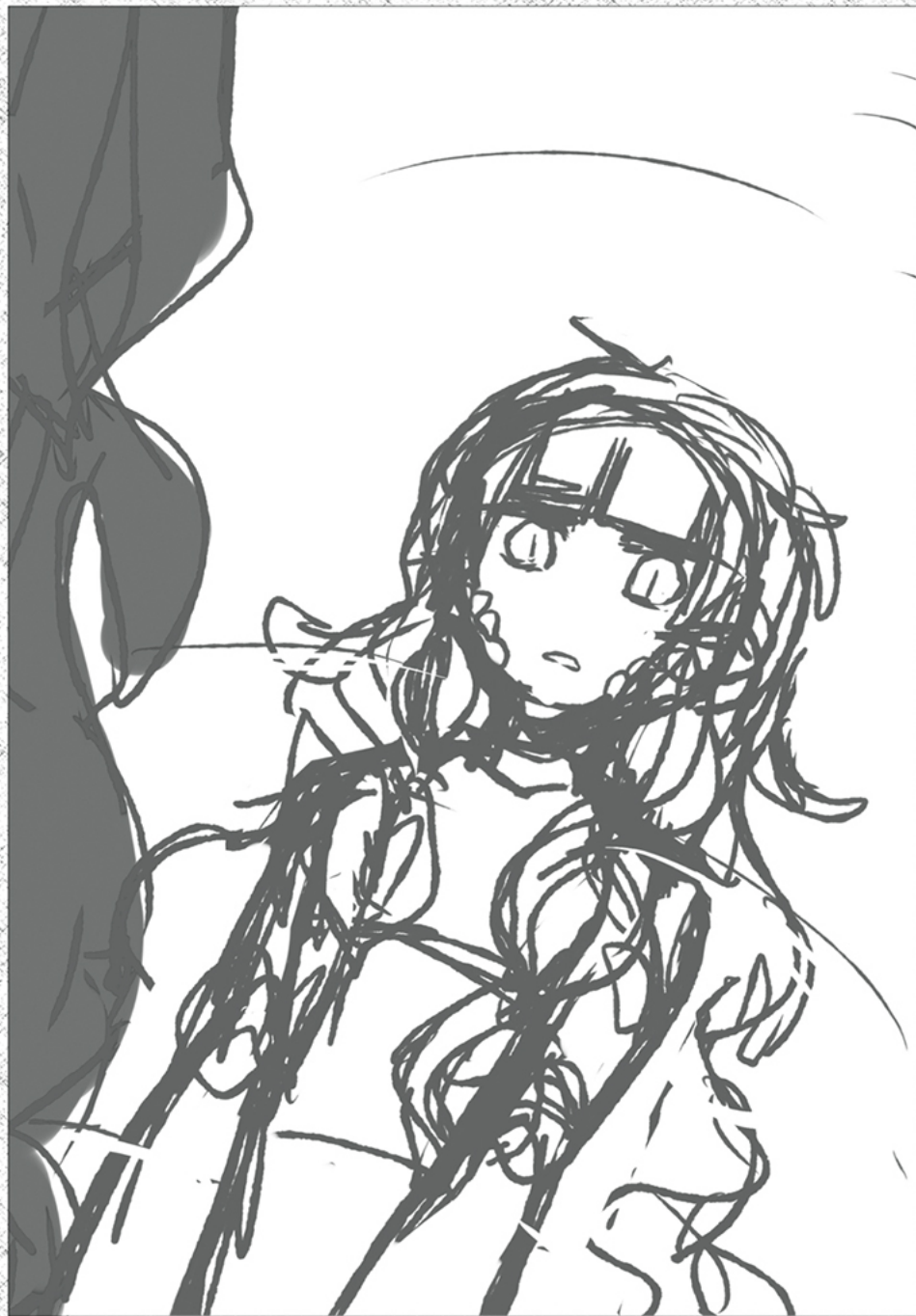








END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 1 SKETCH



END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 2 SKETCH



**END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 3 SKETCH**



END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 4 SKETCH



END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 5 SKETCH



END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 6 SKETCH



END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 7 SKETCH



YIKES

END-OF-BOOK SPECIAL
ILLUSTRATION 8 SKETCH

